

**ACROSS THE BORDER:  
THE SUCCESSES AND FAILURES  
OF OPERATION ROCKCRUSHER**

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fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree

**MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE**  
Military History

by

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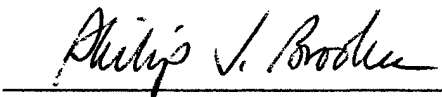
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## ABSTRACT

**ACROSS THE BORDER: THE SUCCESSES AND FAILURES OF OPERATION ROCKCRUSHER** by MAJ Donald V. Phillips, USA, 140 pages.

This study examines the planning, execution, and results of US military involvement in the 1970 Cambodian incursions. Named Operation Rockcrusher, the attacks targeted North Vietnamese sanctuaries in officially neutral Cambodia. Strategic guidance for the operation reflected the Nixon administration's desire to proceed with troop reductions and quickly "Vietnamize" the war in Southeast Asia. Efforts to set conditions for a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, including a covert bombing campaign of Cambodia, failed. These factors, along with a deteriorating political situation within Cambodia, led to approval of the assaults.

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The study highlights lessons that may be appropriate to today's lower intensity conflict environment and force structures. It also promotes the need to synchronize goals and objectives throughout the levels of war. It concludes that attritional warfare, a dubious legacy from Vietnam, remains a danger to the Army today.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

There has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited.<sup>1</sup>

General Sun Wu Tzu, *The Art of War*

At 9:00 P.M., 30 April 1970, President Richard M. Nixon went on television to address the American public on the situation in Southeast Asia: "Ten days ago, in my report to the nation on Vietnam, I announced a decision to withdraw an additional 150,000 Americans from Vietnam over the next year. I said then that I was making that decision despite our concern over increased enemy activity in Laos, in Cambodia, and in South Vietnam."<sup>2</sup>

With the aid of a large map containing red zones of major Communist influence, President Nixon spoke of past American policy toward the Kingdom of Cambodia. He also discussed a growing North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) presence along the Cambodian-South Vietnamese border. Given the reduction of American involvement mentioned earlier, many in the audience gasped at the President's next statements:

In cooperation with the armed forces of South Vietnam, attacks are being launched this week to clean out major enemy sanctuaries on the Cambodian-Vietnam border. . . . Tonight, American and South Vietnamese units will attack the headquarters for the entire Communist military operation in South Vietnam.

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<sup>1</sup>Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 73.

<sup>2</sup>US President, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States (Washington DC: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Record Service, 1953-), Richard M. Nixon, 1971, 405-406.



This key control center has been occupied by the North for five years in blatant violation of Cambodia's neutrality. This is not an invasion of Cambodia. The areas in which these attacks will be launched are completely occupied and controlled by North Vietnamese forces. Our purpose is not to occupy the areas. Once enemy forces are driven out of these sanctuaries and once their military supplies are destroyed, we will withdraw.<sup>3</sup>

While President Nixon spoke, over 25,000 US and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops assaulted Communist bases across the "Fishhook," a forty-mile swath of the Cambodian border. Farther to the south, ARVN forces launched a similar operation in the "Parrot's Beak" region of the border. The Vietnamese named these operations Toan Thang (Total Victory) 42 in the Parrot's Beak and Toan Thang 43 in the Fishhook. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), code-named the assaults Rockcrusher.<sup>4</sup> These were the first operational cross-border attacks by conventional ground forces of the war (figure 1).

Major elements of the 25th Infantry Division, 1st Cavalry Division, and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) sought to trap elements of the 5th Viet Cong and 7th North Vietnamese Army Divisions in their previously safe sanctuaries. Intelligence reports described large training and refitting bases and supply caches throughout the border. Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the supreme communist field headquarters, also operated somewhere in the area.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 407-408.

<sup>4</sup>Keith W. Nolan, *Into Cambodia* (New York: Dell Books, 1990), 98.

<sup>5</sup>G-2 Estimate, First Cavalry Division After Action Report, Elvy B. Roberts Papers, US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA.

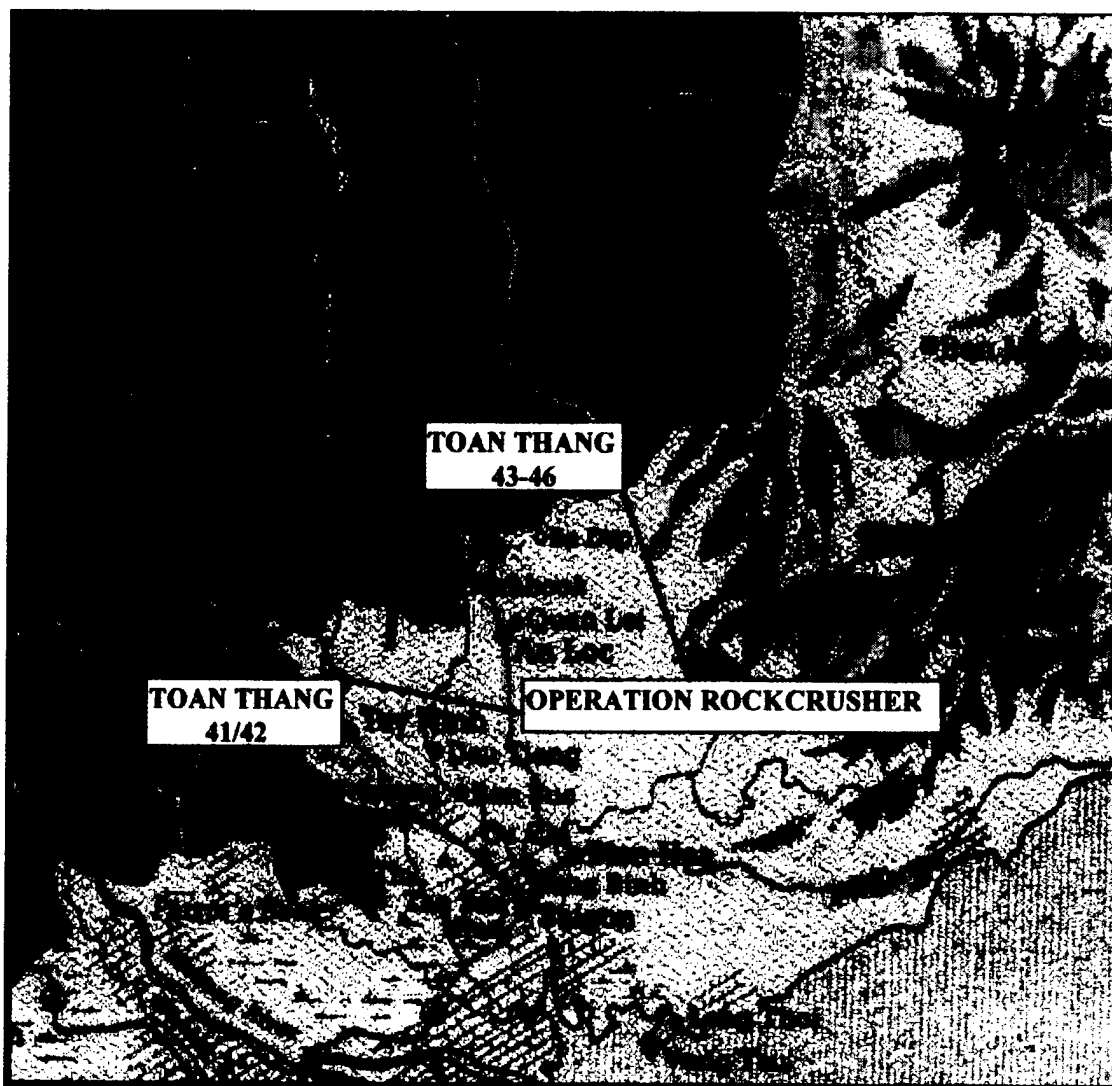


Figure 1. Operation Rockcrusher

From the outset, President Nixon imposed major restrictions on the invasion force. All Americans involved in the operation would be withdrawn by 30 June 1970. US penetration would be limited to thirty kilometers (rounded up to twenty-two miles by

the Pentagon) from the border.<sup>6</sup> After the initial assaults, operations would focus on force protection and destruction of captured communist infrastructure. With these missions and limitations, Allied forces invaded Cambodia. With this action, the myth of Cambodian neutrality ended and the Vietnam War was openly recognized as the Second Indochina War.

The battle for Snoul, a town located at a key road junction near the border, exemplifies the pace of the operation.<sup>7</sup> After a sixty-kilometer drive through the eastern edge of the Fishhook, Colonel Donn Starry's 11th ACR halted the third morning of the assault to reconnoiter and plan for the capture of the town. Although armored cavalry had served in Vietnam long before the incursions, commanders often relegated its use to route-bound escort duties and reaction force applications. This situation would provide an opportunity for the regiment's armored vehicles to be used in a more traditional offensive fashion.

According to the unit's interpreters, refugees from the town indicated that Snoul was "a major center of NVA activity."<sup>8</sup> Helicopter scouts received heavy .51-caliber anti-aircraft fire from a small airfield on the eastern edge of the town. An additional report of a truck column near the airstrip gave credence to the military significance of Snoul. Perhaps frustrated at the lack of significant contact to date, Colonel Starry elected

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<sup>6</sup>Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 507.

<sup>7</sup>Battle account from General Donn A. Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1978), 172-73.

<sup>8</sup>After-Action Report by Cambodian Interpreters from the US Marine Corps in First Cavalry After Action Report, Elvy B. Roberts Papers.

to surround and assault the town. A near fratricide between supporting attack helicopters and the 2d Squadron forced Starry to withdraw the remaining gunships. As the Sheridan light tanks and ACAVs (Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicles) of 2d Squadron advanced, elements received heavy small arms and rocket propelled grenade (RPG) fire. Lacking infantry support, Starry was unwilling to commit his heavy forces in fighting in urban terrain. The regiment halted its assault.

After hours of shelling, napalm airstrikes and direct fire, Starry's troops again moved on Snoul, now little more than a pile of rubble. Characteristically, the NVA had withdrawn, slipping by the 11th ACR without decisive engagement. Accounts differ on the value of the attack. Journalists covering Snoul's destruction claim the town never harbored more than occasional VC and NVA elements. When Snoul fell, eyewitnesses reported sighting only four bodies lying near a large bunker. Two of the bodies were women.<sup>9</sup> Incidents of looting by US soldiers also made the news. Lieutenant Colonel Grail Brookshire, 2d Squadron Commander, sarcastically replied to such accusations: "You guys said my men systematically looted the town. My God, they couldn't do anything that systematic."<sup>10</sup>

To rebut media criticism of the attack, Colonel Starry cited the discovery of a heavily traveled road and the abandoned convoy of Soviet-built trucks near the town. Heavy mortars and a fully equipped motor park with caches of 76-millimeter light tank

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<sup>9</sup>"Allies Open Sixth Thrust in Cambodia," *New York Times*, May 7th, 1970, sec. 1, A 17.

<sup>10</sup>Brookshire interview with Kevin Buckley of Newsweek quoted in William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 151-52.

ammunition found in Snoul further supported his contentions. A Sheridan commander assigned to escort one of the unsympathetic media stated "Shit, we had contact. Every time we started taking fire that God damn reporter would try to jump in my turret."<sup>11</sup> Helicopter reconnaissance near Snoul led other US units to a cache called "the City." This NVA complex was so large that it contained a firing range, eighteen mess halls, and a swimming pool.<sup>12</sup> Whatever its real worth, "Snoul" appropriately became part of cavalry jargon meaning "the act of annihilation."<sup>13</sup>

Although conventional American troops never openly ventured beyond the thirty-kilometer tactical limit of advance, the incursions had repercussions at all levels of war. US commitment to the destruction of Communist forces in "neutral Cambodia" was now overt. The invasions gave Cambodia's pro-US regime under General Lon Nol, racked with internal turmoil, support to expand a war it could not win. Despite massive infusions of Allied arms, troops, and airpower, the NVA and Khmer Rouge expanded their grip westward throughout Cambodia. In the US, despite troop withdrawals, many in the public perceived the incursions as expansion of the war effort. Large demonstrations at college campus including those leading to the Kent State shootings came in the direct wake of the incursions.

Over the next five years, an estimated 539,129 tons of bombs fell on Cambodia in efforts to prop up Lon Nol and impede North Vietnamese attempts to rebuild their

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<sup>11</sup>Interview with 2/11 ACR Sheridan commander, Fort Benning, GA, 1996.

<sup>12</sup>Starry, 174.

<sup>13</sup>Edward Doyle and Samuel Lipsman, *The Vietnam Experience: Fighting for Time* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1983), 165.

sanctuaries.<sup>14</sup> Despite this military commitment,<sup>15</sup> the weak governments of South Vietnam and Cambodia eventually fell. By 1975, North Vietnamese T-55 tanks rolled through Saigon. Simultaneously, the Khmer Rouge Communists achieved victory in Cambodia, leading that nation to the genocide described in the book, *The Killing Fields*.

Ironically, as far back as 1965, strategic planners did not even consider victory against the communists as a primary objective. Examples of this "conflict management" existed in the Johnson administration at the highest levels. The following memorandum by Assistant John McNaughton for Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara outlined the US commitment to South Vietnam as of 1965:

US AIMS:

70% -- to avoid a humiliating US defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor).

20% -- To keep South Vietnam (and the adjacent) territory from Chinese hands.

10% -- To permit the people of South Vietnam to enjoy a better, freer way of life.

ALSO -- To emerge from crisis without unacceptable taint from methods used.

NOT -- to "help a friend," although it would be hard to say if asked out. . .

Progress inside South Vietnam is our main aim.<sup>16</sup>

Without a strategic plan to win the war, the fighting ground on while national support withered. Not willing to risk superpower nuclear confrontation or his domestic

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<sup>14</sup>US Congress, House Committee on the Judiciary. *Statement of Information*, Book 11: *Bombing of Cambodia* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1974), 108.

<sup>15</sup>Or perhaps "because of" as William Shawcross has argued in *Sideshow*. This book condemns the Nixon administration for forcing Cambodia to align against the communists, thereby losing any hope of neutrality and sealing its fate.

<sup>16</sup>"McNaughton Draft for McNamara on the Proposed Course of Action #96," *The Pentagon Papers* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 432-433.

agenda, total victory over North Vietnam remained politically unacceptable to President Johnson. By the 1968 Tet Offensive, a massive tactical defeat for the Communists, the war was so unpopular that it effectively terminated the Johnson administration. De-escalation and withdrawal became the only acceptable alternatives for the nation. For the US military, fighting under a frustrating combination of political limitations, uncertain purposes and eroding national support, the practical effect of this strategy suspiciously resembled defeat.

From this point onward, the Vietnam War was politically lost for the Americans. While the US military maintained its strategically defensive posture, the North Vietnamese enemy continued to hold total victory as their unswerving strategic aim.<sup>17</sup> The American people demanded not so much a conclusion, but a separation from the war. The Nixon administration, winning the 1968 presidential election on a platform of "peace with honor," acknowledged the war was unwinnable in the traditional sense. President Nixon, making good on his campaign promise of withdrawal, announced troop reductions. In March 1969, the first US combat units came home. Still, large problems remained. How could the administration extract nearly 500,000 US troops while maintaining the US "reputation as a guarantor?"

A solution was offered in a series of initiatives enacted by the newly elected Nixon administration. From what began as an informal press conference after witnessing the Apollo 11 splashdown off Guam, President Nixon announced:

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<sup>17</sup>Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell Books, 1982), 26. A detailed discussion of the implications of these strategies is contained in Colonel Summers book.

I believe that the time has come when the United States, in our relations with all our Asian friends, (should) be quite emphatic on two points: One, that we will keep our treaty commitments, for example with Thailand under SEATO; but, two, that as far as the problems of military defense, except for the threat of a major power involving nuclear weapons, that the United States is going to encourage and has a right to expect that this problem will increasingly be handled by and the responsibility for it taken by, the Asian nations themselves.<sup>18</sup>

The President elaborated on his new doctrine in a speech on 3 November 1969.

First, he reiterated treaty commitments to the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). Targeting the Soviet Union and China, he promised to “provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us.”<sup>19</sup> The final point clearly foreshadowed the future of Vietnam policy, stating: “in cases involving other types of aggression, we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested and as appropriate. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense.”<sup>20</sup>

The administration chose the awkward term “Vietnamization” to describe its policy that formally commenced on 1 July 1969. Vietnamization combined US withdrawal with ARVN improvement and expansion over three broad phases. In Phase I, ground combat responsibility would be slowly turned over to a modernized South Vietnamese Army. Phase II would improve ARVN combat support and infrastructure systems including overhaul of recruitment and basic training. By Phase III, the

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<sup>18</sup>Nixon quoted in Kissinger, 224.

<sup>19</sup>US President, Richard M. Nixon, 1969.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.



American military presence would be reduced to an advisory capacity, giving South Vietnam "primary responsibility for its own defense."<sup>21</sup>

Critics of Vietnamization accused the administration of constructing an unrealistically ambitious plan. Many believed the true purpose was merely to minimize the national humiliation of a US withdrawal. This position, while sometimes overstated, is echoed in a 1969 memorandum by Henry Kissinger to the President. Kissinger was specifically concerned about:

- the pace of public opposition in the US to our continuing the fight in any form. (Past experience indicates that Vietnamization will not significantly slow it down.)
- the ability of the US Government to maintain its own discipline carrying out this policy. (As public pressures grow, you may face increasing governmental disarray with a growing number of press leaks, etc.)
- the actual ability of the South Vietnamese Government and armed force to replace American withdrawals--both physically and psychologically. (Conclusive evidence is lacking here; this fact in itself, and past experience, argue against optimism.)
- the degree to which Hanoi's current losses affect its ability to fight later
- i.e., losses of military cadre, political infrastructure, etc. (Again, the evidence is not definitive. Most reports of progress have concerned security gains by US forces -- not a lasting erosion of enemy political strength.)
- the ability of the GVN to gain solid political benefit from its current pacification progress. (Again, reports of progress have been largely about security gains behind the US shield.)

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<sup>21</sup>David Fulghum and Terrence Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial: The Vietnam Experience* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1981), 50.

*Our Vietnamization policy thus rests on a series of favorable assumptions which may not be accurate [emphasis mine], although no one can be certain on the basis of current analyses.*<sup>22</sup>

The soldiers serving in Vietnam voiced more blunt opinions of Vietnamization.

With troop withdrawal timetables taking absolute priority during the period of Vietnamization, some termed the process a cover for retreat. Most assessments indicated that ARVN forces simply could not stand up to the North Vietnamese Army alone.<sup>23</sup> Without American airpower, logistics, and advisory support to its army, many felt that South Vietnam would quickly fall to the communists.

Thus, the seeds for Operation Rockcrusher were sown. After covert bombings of border sanctuaries failed in 1969, the Nixon administration approved more definitive measures. Frustrated with unsuccessful attempts to isolate South Vietnam from infiltration, MACV commander, General Creighton Abrams sought approval for an overt ground strike on the Cambodian sanctuaries. By early 1970, the Pentagon received the President's permission to plan for large-scale incursions with a target date of late spring. By May, the last major US ground offensive of the war would commence, setting the stage for full withdrawal.

Regardless of the immediate outcome, the long-term strategic consequences of the incursions shook the region. Acting in national self-interest, the US used this operation to justify further disengagement from Southeast Asia, leaving a military void South Vietnam and Cambodia simply could not fill. By quitting Indochina, America

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<sup>22</sup>Kissinger, 286.

<sup>23</sup>Fulghum and Maitland, 52.

avoided the catastrophic military results of defeat and the seemingly endless drain on manpower and resources. The consequences of this US strategy fell to its former allies. The Second Indochina War, based on tensions far older than America itself, dragged on, supplied by arms from the superpowers. Eventually, North Vietnam won its war, South Vietnam lost its war, and Cambodia lost almost everything.

Many authors have written books attempting to explain this American strategic failure. Some describe the failure of airpower; others charge the US military with a reductionist attempt to fight a complex insurgency with conventional doctrine and equipment. Colonel Harry Summers's *On Strategy* has withstood time and scrutiny, providing a more straightforward explanation for the communist victory.<sup>24</sup> Summer describes the war's outcome as attributable to an American inability to recognize the true nature of the conflict. Incorrectly perceiving the war as an internal struggle, the US political-military structure adopted a defensive strategy to stabilize South Vietnam from Viet Cong insurgency. North Vietnam, as evidenced by the Tet Offensive, the 1972 Easter Offensive and the eventual seizure of Saigon, conducted a protracted but strategically offensive war on South Vietnam and its American ally. Avoiding US strength, the NVA assumed the tactical offensive only after careful consideration and only to achieve politically expedient ends. The US, devoid of a strategy capable of seizing initiative from the NVA, lost the will to fight over time. Despite repeated tactical victories, the Americans suffered strategic defeat.

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<sup>24</sup>Summers, 1-27.

Research in this thesis supports Colonel Summer's assertions. The massive NVA infrastructure revealed by the Cambodian incursions refuted the idea that the war was a VC insurgency supported by the NVA. Main force NVA units engaged Cambodian, US and ARVN forces in an effort to retain Cambodia as a base of operations into the south. Documents captured during the incursions clearly showed the subordinate link of COSVN and forces in the south to Hanoi. Despite the setback caused by the incursions, the eventual attacks out of Cambodia in 1972 and 1975 came in the form of NVA armor and heavy artillery supported by VC guerrillas.

This thesis examines the practical effects of executing the tactical and operational aspects of the Cambodian campaign in a climate of strategic withdrawal. As the US military implemented de-escalation, it performed a political function contradictory to conventional military notions of success. On the battlefield, however, units still operated under operational and tactical victory conditions. Could the military, in this case, the US Army, adapt to a policy of strategic withdrawal and still successfully function as a fighting force to achieve its political goal? In effect, could a strategy acknowledging defeat escape the consequences of defeat? Did the Americans "win" in Operation Rockcrusher?

The answer is as complex as the war itself. Examining the problem requires an investigation of the incursions at both the operational and tactical levels of war and a comparison of the results to the strategic aims of the National Command Authorities. Was there an established political end state for the operation? If so, what military objectives were derived to support this end state? Using the objectives and goals as

success criteria, did the invasion force effectively accomplish these goals at each level of conflict?

A cursory examination might lead one to assume that Rockcrusher is another example of winning the battle while losing the war. The Allied forces conducted a large-scale coordinated assault that appeared to succeed at the tactical level where other measures had failed. The Pentagon compiled lists of captured war material as evidence of its victory.<sup>25</sup> President Nixon would go on to claim this operation as an unqualified victory and vindication of his Vietnamization policies.

On the battlefield, the results are less clear. One veteran remarks . . . the thing that struck us all at the time was the disappointment that there was no decisive combat, no capture of COSVN, no real feeling that anything had truly been accomplished.<sup>26</sup> Others pointed to a mixed bag of operational and tactical achievements: successful feats of maneuver, logistics, and engineering contrasted against failures in operational security, intelligence, and command and control.

The following chapters tell the story of the incursions. They chart the collision of the North Vietnamese and US armies along the violated borders of Cambodia. Chapter 2 sets the stage, describing the strategic and operational setting and examining the historic basis for Cambodia's role in Vietnam's war. Chapter 3 discusses growing American concern about communist infiltration of the Cambodian-Vietnamese border, the secret

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<sup>25</sup>*Richard M. Nixon*, "Address to the Nation on the Cambodian Sanctuary Operation: 3 June 1970," on Nixon Links, <http://www.tezcat.com/~nrm/nixon/nixon.html>, accessed 1 September 1998.

<sup>26</sup>Interview memo with LTC George W. Steuber, dated 16 September 1998.

bombings and early reconnaissance efforts into the sanctuaries. The remainder of chapter 3 reviews the operational planning and preparation for the invasion.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the operation in depth. Chapter 4 is a detailed, chronological account of Rockcrusher. Initially, the operation is examined from an operational perspective. Then the chapter focuses primarily on Toan Thang 43, the Fishhook incursions. Here, the overall operation will be examined with highlights from several small unit battles and engagements. This illustrates the successes and failures of the assaults at the lowest level of war. Chapter 5 is dedicated to an analysis of the operation. First, did the plan make sense? Did the objectives at the lower levels of war complement Rockcrusher's strategic aims? Did operational art provide the needed linkage between the combat unit and the NCA's vision? Then, based on reviewing the intended results, success at the operational and tactical levels can be judged. Selected battlefield operating systems are used as the framework for this analysis.

In researching these chapters, primary sources have been used where available. Operational information comes mostly from original unit documents obtained at the US Army Military History Institute at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and the Combined Arms Research Library at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. These include unit after action reviews, message traffic, official histories, and operations orders. The descriptions of tactical actions rely on these documents and personal interviews of concerned individuals conducted by the author and others. Keith Nolan's book, *Into Cambodia*, contains an impressive amount of interview history. While not always cross checked with written records, his book provided a great deal of tactical detail to the operation. ARVN

participation in the incursions, while larger and for a longer period of time than the US, is not well documented. Tran Din Tho, Assistant Chief of Staff, Operations for the South Vietnamese Army, his book, *The Cambodian Incursions*, provided background on the critical role of ARVN forces in this operation.

Chapter 6, "Conclusion," restates the results of the study with an eye to the future. Using Rockcrusher as a backdrop, it asks what might happen if future operations fall victim to problems experienced during the incursions. What happens when the strategic, operational and tactical objectives fail to mesh? As in the case of President Nixon's obsession with capturing COSVN, what effect does tactical micromangement have on operations in the field? How does a climate of strategic withdrawal and low tolerance for friendly casualties dictate tactics on the battlefield? With the muddled results of the Persian Gulf War, Somalia and the Kosovo crisis fresh in American minds, these issues continue to be relevant.

## CHAPTER 2

### STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL SETTING

First and foremost we are Cambodians, and lackeys of foreign powers have no hope for success here.<sup>1</sup>

Prince Norodom Sihanouk

The incursions occurred in a small country sometimes labeled a “sideshow” to the war in South Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> Sideshow best describes the American public's understanding of Cambodia during the US involvement in Vietnam. In reality, the affairs of Vietnam and Cambodia have long been deeply intertwined. Clashing political, cultural, and religious traditions created historic animosities between the two countries. The war in Vietnam added instability to the existing tensions of the region. Despite the efforts of its government, Cambodia found itself dragged into Vietnam's war. “Neutral Cambodia,” as it was often termed to prior to 1970, would only possess the neutrality of a battlefield.

Cambodia occupies approximately 70,000 square miles of the Indochina peninsula. The country lies ten degrees north of the equator on the Gulf of Thailand, making its climate tropical. A drenching monsoon season lasts from May to November each year. Cambodia's main water features, the Tonle Sap (Great Lake) and the Mekong River, drain southeasterly into Vietnam's Mekong Delta. These waters carve through a

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<sup>1</sup>Norodom Sihanouk, “Cambodia Neutral: The Dictate of Necessity,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1958, 583.

<sup>2</sup>William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 1.



jungle flatland that dominates most of Cambodia with the exception of the Cardamom and Elephant Mountains in the southwest (figure2).<sup>3</sup> Surrounded by Thailand to the west, Laos to the north, and Vietnam to the east, Cambodia possesses a geographic vulnerabilities that can be exploited by to any aggressive neighbor.

The eastern third of Cambodia, particularly Mandokiri, Ratanakiri, and Kompong Cham provinces, lay outside the historic agricultural and population centers. These Mekong Lowlands cannot support large-scale rice cultivation. Except for some rubber exploitation, the area boasts little economic or geographic value. These lowlands, almost inaccessible to the rest of Cambodia during the monsoons, merge imperceptibly into the western frontier of Vietnam. No continuous landmark delineates the border. Nor is there an immediate cultural shift in these provinces. Ethnic Vietnamese and aboriginal tribes constitute a sizable minority of the already sparse population.<sup>4</sup>

The population of Cambodia, approximately seven million by 1970, consists primarily of ethnic Khmer.<sup>5</sup> Although the origin of the Khmer people remains unclear, they emerged as a culture radically different from that of their Chinese influenced neighbors, the Vietnamese. Archeological evidence points to a major influx of Indian culture into Cambodia and Thailand around the time of the birth of Christ. Indianization and with it

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<sup>3</sup>DA PAM 550-50, *Area Handbook for the Khmer Republic of Cambodia* (Washington, DC,: Government Printing Office,1972) , 7.

<sup>4</sup>Ashok K. Dutt, ed., *Southeast Asia--Realms of Contrast* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press,1985), 191.

<sup>5</sup>DA PAM 550-50, vii.



Figure 2. South Vietnam and Cambodia

Hinduism had complex and long-lasting influence on the Khmer. It fused with local custom through music, costume, writing, and many other cultural manifestations. Indianization changed rural Cambodia, placing it culturally closer to India than to Vietnam.<sup>6</sup>

Early Khmer kingdoms expanded their empires within limits set by the region's great power China. Texts reveal that Funan, the first Khmer state, became an irregular vassal to China beginning around the A.D. 600.<sup>7</sup> Funan held imperialistic goals, racking Indochina with war until its decline and subsequent annexation by the Chenla Kingdom to the north in A.D. 690.<sup>8</sup> These two states covered territory roughly equal to that of present day Cambodia.<sup>9</sup>

After Chenla weakened, it came under the domination of a then powerful Sumatran state and was finally replaced by the emerging kingdom of Angkor.<sup>10</sup> From 812-1431, the "god kings" reigned over Angkor. The first half of this era consisted of unprecedented growth and material gain. The temple-mountains of Angkor Wat, erected from the ninth to the twelfth century, is considered one of the wonders of the ancient world.

With Angkor's increased stature came a drive for regional domination. Improvements in irrigation and an effective bureaucracy advanced Khmer wealth and

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<sup>6</sup>David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983), 11.

<sup>7</sup>*ibid.*, 7.

<sup>8</sup>Dutt, 190.

<sup>9</sup>Shawcross, 38-39.

<sup>10</sup>Dutt, 191-192.

power, bringing in tribute from as far away as Burma.<sup>11</sup> Angkor made several attempts at conquering the Vietnamese kingdom of Champa to the east. Champa escaped Angkor domination due in part to the barrier effect of the Annamite Mountains within Vietnam. In 1177, Champa exacted revenge, pillaging Angkor in a surprise naval attack up the Mekong.<sup>12</sup> The raid fueled a growing ethnic animosity between the Khmer and Vietnamese peoples.

During this period, a trend began which would further separate Khmer and Vietnamese. Theravada Buddhism infiltrated into Cambodia from India. Conservative and individualistic, it appealed to rural Cambodians who were desperate for a release from god-king worship.<sup>13</sup> Hinduism began to disappear and saffron-robed Buddhist monks became a common sight. Most Khmer men spent several years as monks, fulfilling community traditions of interaction with the clergy. However, the Theravada sect did not spill into Vietnam. Mahayana Buddhism and Confucianism had simultaneously migrated south from China. The ritualistic and lay-oriented Mahayana sect contrasted with self-styled Theravada Buddhism.<sup>14</sup> These religious differences further reinforced the ethnic division between the two cultures.

In addition to separating the Khmer from the Vietnamese, Theravada Buddhism separated the Khmer ruler from his subject. This unsettled the stability of Angkor.

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<sup>11</sup>Chandler, 29.

<sup>12</sup>Dutt, 195.

<sup>13</sup>Dutt, 196.

<sup>14</sup>Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 138.

Decay followed as Thailand, formerly Siam, and Vietnam increased in power.

Continuous warfare eroded the overextended monarchy. Exploitation of farmers and court intrigue reinforced Angkor's decline.

By the fourteenth century, Siam had overrun the Angkor capitol twice and remote provinces began to declare independence. In 1431, the Angkor Kingdom formally fell, surrendering to Siam. For the next four centuries, Cambodia labored as a vassal of Siam and a tributary to the growing empire of Annam (Vietnam). Plagues, rebellions, and natural disasters devastated the countryside as Cambodia's neighbors rolled back her borders.<sup>15</sup>

These ancient tensions solidified deep cultural hatreds among the people of Southeast Asia. In 1840, during a major Khmer rebellion, Vietnamese emperor Ming Mang revealed Annamite attitude toward the Cambodians. "Sometimes," he said, "the Cambodians are loyal; at other times they betray us. We helped them when they were suffering and lifted them out of the mud. . . . Now they are rebellious: I am so angry that my hair stands upright . . . hundreds of knives should be used against them."<sup>16</sup> The Cambodians mirrored this hostility, retorting: "We are happy killing Vietnamese, we no longer fear them."<sup>17</sup>

French colonial intervention in the 1860s halted Siamese and Vietnamese encroachment and brought Cambodia back from the brink of extinction. The French

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<sup>15</sup>Shawcross, 39-41.

<sup>16</sup>David P. Chandler, "Cambodia before the French: Politics of a Tributary Kingdom, 1794-1848" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1973) quoted in Shawcross, 41.

<sup>17</sup>Chandler, 41.

exacted their own price. In 1863, France established a protectorate over Cambodia. The Cambodian monarchy of King Norodom Duong remained as a figurehead with true power belonging to the French governor. French culture infused the Cambodian intelligentsia as French politics controlled the throne.

While colonial administration caused periodic strains and insurrections, French troops and gunboats prevailed. Under the threat of forced abdication, King Norodom was coerced into signing an agreement making Cambodia a de facto French colony. France, who also controlled Vietnam, saw Cambodia primarily as a buffer between the fertile Mekong Delta and regionally powerful Siam. Thus, Cambodian national and infrastructure development took a distant second place in French priorities.<sup>18</sup>

By the 1940s, as World War II threatened France's own existence, ideas of nationalism and independence spread through the Cambodian elite. The French attempted to diminish these trends by manipulating Cambodian loyalties through the throne. France switched the royal lineage from the independent Prince Monireth to his seemingly more agreeable cousin Norodom Sihanouk. Sihanouk received the crown in April 1941.<sup>19</sup>

The enigmatic Norodom Sihanouk reigned over Cambodia until ousted by his Minister of Defense Lon Nol, one month before the incursions of 1970. Sihanouk's remarkable personality is well summed up by William Shawcross:

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<sup>18</sup>Roger M. Smith, "Cambodia: Social and Historical Background," *Conflict in Indochina*, Gettleman and Kaplan, ed. (New York: Random House, 1970), 46-47.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 48-49.

Norodom Sihanouk presided feudally over Cambodia from 1941 to 1970, as King, Chief of State, Prince, Prime Minister, head of the main political movement, jazz-band leader, magazine editor, film director and gambling concessionaire, attempting to unite in his rule the unfamiliar concepts of Buddhism, socialism and democracy. His exercise of power was so astonishing and so individual that he came to personify his country and its policies abroad as well as at home. He was vain, a petulant showman who enjoyed boasting of his sexual successes. At the same time he had enormous political skill, charm, tenacity and intelligence. After an uncertain beginning he exploited all these qualities in the interests of one overriding cause--the preservation of Cambodia's peace and its independence from further encroachment by its neighbors. This concern inevitably won him enemies abroad just as his autocracy created them at home.<sup>20</sup>

Sihanouk's exploits inflamed then Vice President Richard Nixon in 1957. He found the King "vain and flighty. He seemed prouder of his musical talents than of his political leadership, and he appeared to be totally unrealistic about the problems his country faced."<sup>21</sup> Nixon's understanding of Cambodia's problems lay in the realm of Cold War allegiances and communist infiltration, a view Sihanouk refused to accept.

Despite Nixon's assessment, Sihanouk's accomplishments suggest he was quite realistic in dealing with his country's problems. During his reign, he managed a brief respite from Cambodia's five hundred years of vassalship and "protection." Sihanouk freed Cambodia from French colonial rule, walked a tightrope of neutrality amid the increasingly tense situation of Southeast Asia, and succeeded, almost, in keeping his country out of the destruction of the Vietnam War.

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<sup>20</sup>Shawcross, 46.

<sup>21</sup>Richard Nixon, *RN: Memoirs of the White House Years* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978) quoted in Edward Doyle and Samuel Lipsman, *Fighting for Time: The Vietnam Experience* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1981), 121.

Sihanouk's charismatic style made him extremely popular with rural Khmer and a serious threat to French colonial power. In 1949, he negotiated partial freedom from French rule. Three years later, he launched a full independence campaign which took him around the world. Through threats, appeals, and rash ultimatums, he achieved his goal in 1953.<sup>22</sup> France, embroiled in more serious concerns in Vietnam and Algeria, put up little protest and agreed to Sihanouk's demands.

In Vietnam, French forces had been fighting a smoldering guerrilla war in Vietnam since the late nineteenth century. Nationalist sentiments fueled several rebellions that caused a steady drain on French military resources. With the advent of Ho Chi Minh's Vietnamese Communist Party in the 1930s, anticolonial sentiment grew and war spread. The Japanese conquest of Vietnam in World War II led to a brutal co-domination by the Imperial Japanese and Vichy French. Throughout the war, the Communists maintained a nationalist front, fighting Japanese and Vichy French colonialists. Looking toward the future, Ho Chi Minh began preparing for the departure of the French and the eventual conquest of all of Vietnam.

After a brief taste of independence in 1945, French occupation troops returned and cracked down on the new Vietnamese government. By November 1946 open warfare erupted in the north as Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh forces attacked the French in Hanoi.<sup>23</sup> The next eight years are known as the First Indochina War. Although the main

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<sup>22</sup>Shawcross, 48.

<sup>23</sup>Edward Doyle, Samuel Lipsman and Stephen Wise, *Passing the Torch: The Vietnam Experience* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1981), 12



Vietminh war effort concentrated in northern Vietnam, the Communists formed revolutionary cells and an immense logistical system throughout much of eastern Indochina including Cambodia.

As would be the case against the Americans, the Vietminh used Cambodia as a staging area for forays into the Mekong Delta. The French Army, subsidized by US arms and other aid, tired in fruitless efforts to pin down the Communists. Despite numerous tactical victories, the French never succeeded in gaining decisive engagement with the Vietminh on their terms. At the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the French were defeated and lacking public support for the war, agreed to a cease-fire.<sup>24</sup>

In June 1954, delegations representing the belligerents and the major world powers met in Geneva, Switzerland, to decide the future of Indochina. As a face-saving measure, the French accepted a partition of Vietnam, granting independence to the Communists North. Perceiving a threat from the communists, the United States and its allies backed the Korea-like separation of Vietnam assisting the anticommunist southern regime. Likewise, Russia, its allies, and China provided support for Ho Chi Minh's newly created North Vietnam. The 1954 Geneva Peace Accords for Indochina, in addition to creating the division of North and South Vietnam, recognized Cambodia with "full independence and sovereignty, in the peaceful community of nations."<sup>25</sup> Sihanouk, suspicious of the newly established Vietnams, refused to sign the accords until a clause

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<sup>24</sup>Doyle, Lipsman, and Wise, 79.

<sup>25</sup>Encyclopedia of the United Nations and International Agreements, 1954, ed. Edmund Jan Osmanczyk, s.v. "Indochina Geneva Conference and Agreements (Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis, 1985), 380..

was added allowing Cambodia to make "defensive alliances to stem foreign aggression."<sup>26</sup>

Intent on appearing separate from South Vietnam and the United States, he immediately embarked on a mission intent on establishing neutrality. Cambodia's final declaration at the Conference stated his goals:

The Royal Government of Cambodia is resolved never to take part in an aggressive policy and never to permit the territory of Cambodia to be utilized in the service of such a policy.

The Royal Government of Cambodia will not join in any agreement with other states, if this agreement carries for Cambodia the obligation to enter into a military alliance not in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations, or, as long as its security is not threatened, the obligation to establish bases on Cambodian territory for the military forces of foreign powers.

The Royal Government of Cambodia is resolved to settle its international disputes by peaceful means, in such a manner as not to endanger peace, international security and justice. During the period which will elapse between the cessation of hostilities in Vietnam and that of the final settlement of political problems in this country, the Royal Government of Cambodia will not solicit foreign aid in war material, personnel or instructors except for the purpose of the effective defense of the territory.<sup>27</sup>

The Geneva Accords resulted in little more than a temporary cease-fire, allowing the French time to depart Southeast Asia. American dissatisfaction over specific provisions in the accords led to a refusal by the US and South Vietnamese to sign the agreement. Still, opposing forces agreed to relocate north and south of the seventeenth parallel. The North Vietnamese left agents, organizers, and war materials throughout

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<sup>26</sup>Doyle, Lipsman, and Wise, 84.

<sup>27</sup>Osmanczyk, 380.

South Vietnam and Cambodia to prepare for the resumption of their goal to unify the peninsula.<sup>28</sup>

Confident in his ability to steer Cambodia away from Indochina's continuing problems, Sihanouk abdicated his kingship to assume a more politically active role in his country's future. He assumed the title of Prince of Cambodia while his charisma and mass support enabled his party to sweep the country's first elections. In 1954, he became the Prime Minister.<sup>29</sup>

Over the next fifteen years, Sihanouk kept Cambodia from openly taking sides in the Vietnam controversy. Depending largely on the tide of the war in South Vietnam, Cambodia's relationship to the US government ranged from friendly to hostile. After signing a huge military and economic aid package with the United States in 1954, Sihanouk visited Communist China and declined membership in the American-sponsored SEATO (Southeast Asian Treaty Organization).<sup>30</sup> As relations with Washington worsened, Cambodia confronted several incidents of Thai and South Vietnamese harassment and violations of Cambodian territory. This included support of the Khmer Serei or Free Khmer. As anti-Sihanouk rebels, they received arms and training from ARVN units and their American advisors. The Prince responded by open denunciation and the formation of Khmer Krom mercenaries. Through Sihanouk's instigation, these

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<sup>28</sup>Doyle, Lipsman, and Wise, 115.

<sup>29</sup>Shawcross, 49.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 52.

ethnic Cambodians attempted to destabilize Vietnamese border provinces. Within ten years, however, the South Vietnamese had neutralized most Khmer Krom units.<sup>31</sup>

By the early 1960s, increased border clashes with South Vietnam and Thailand and a right-wing coup attempt further distanced Cambodian and the US/South Vietnamese alliance. On two separate occasions in 1962, Cambodian troops invaded disputed coastal islands and moved border markers farther into South Vietnam. ARVN soldiers retaliated by mining the border,<sup>32</sup> “accidentally” shelling Cambodian units and attacking short distances into Cambodia in hot pursuit of the Viet Cong.<sup>33</sup>

In 1963, Sihanouk terminated formal relations with the US and South Vietnam. Aid programs, advisors, and embassy personnel were ordered out of the country in November of that year. Sihanouk ordered banks and industries nationalized and secretly permitted Vietnamese Communists to reopen sanctuaries along the border for operations into South Vietnam. In 1966, Sihanouk opened formal diplomatic relations with Hanoi and expanded cooperation with the Viet Cong.<sup>34</sup>

The years 1964 and 1965 were the worst of the decade for the ailing South Vietnamese government. Convinced that the Communists would eventually win the war, Sihanouk allowed increased NVA and VC violation of his country's proclaimed neutrality. He concluded: “Our interests are served by dealing with the camp that one

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<sup>31</sup>Tran Dinh Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion* (Washington, DC: US Army Center for Military History, 1979), 13.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 14.

<sup>33</sup>Shawcross, 52.

<sup>34</sup>Tho, 16.

day will dominate the whole of Asia--and by coming to terms before this victory--in order to obtain the best terms possible.”<sup>35</sup> Through the Chinese, he obtained Hanoi's “guarantee” of territorial integrity in return for his concessions.

Still, Sihanouk demonstrated no real desire for a Cambodia closely allied to the Communists. In his own words: “I have sometimes been represented to the American public as trying to flirt with the Reds. The fact is, I abdicated in 1955 to save the monarchy--not to abandon it.”<sup>36</sup> The Khmer Rouge, Cambodia's native communist party, was repressed throughout this period and the Prince's relationship to his communist neighbors remained distant and business oriented.

The NVA and VC forces responded by initially keeping a low profile while in Cambodia. News of Sihanouk's dealings with the North slowly leaked out as the financial aspect of the relationship increased. By 1967, the port of Sihanoukville became open to shipments of supplies to Communist forces in Vietnam. Sihanouk permitted this under a lucrative trade agreement giving one-third of all goods moved through the port to the Cambodian government. “At that rate,” Sihanouk later admitted, “one sells oneself.”<sup>37</sup>

Sihanouk lost what little control he had over the Vietnamese Communists as America directly entered the war, and the tide of battle changed in favor of South Vietnam. The expansion of the US war effort and Communist defeats in the Ia Drang

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<sup>35</sup>Doyle, Lipsman, and Wise, 127.

<sup>36</sup>Sihanouk, 586.

<sup>37</sup>Sihanouk Interview, *New York Times*, 8 July 1973.

Valley threw the North on the operational defensive. Many base areas had to be withdrawn from the exposed Delta regions to old Vietminh fortifications in Cambodia. Existing cross border facilities expanded to meet increased shipments of Russian and Chinese war material.<sup>38</sup> Sihanouk's government watched the developments with mounting anxiety, unable to raise open protest without admitting their cooperation with the North Vietnamese.

The growth of a huge rice trade between rural Cambodians and the NVA caused Sihanouk additional consternation. By paying the farmers at current world rates in American dollars, the Communists deprived the Cambodian government of taxes and profits on the rice. None too eager to see this potentially lucrative trade end, members of the Cambodian elite became involved as middlemen. Rumors of the day said that Sihanouk's half-Italian wife, Monique, received gigantic bribes from Vietnamese and Chinese Communists in return for influencing the Prince to permit the rice trade.<sup>39</sup> The trade expanded to include arms and ammunition with Lon Nol, Cambodia's staunch anti-Communist, listed as a major profiteer.<sup>40</sup>

The Communists continued to modernize their logistical system to transport and disseminate these materials destined for South Vietnam. The system involved three major transport networks, the Ho Chi Minh trail from Laos, a sea route down the South

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<sup>38</sup>Craig Etcheson, *The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), 76.

<sup>39</sup>Doyle, Lipsman, and Wise, 130.

<sup>40</sup>Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Brown and Company, 1979), 463.

Vietnamese coast, and the Sihanoukville port route (figure 3). The 150,000 troops and laborers maintained the Ho Chi Minh trail, much improved since the war against France. The trail, actually a series of extremely well-camouflaged dirt and asphalt roads, snaked toward Cambodia under an umbrella of anti-aircraft weapons ranging from machine guns to 100-millimeter high-altitude artillery. Regardless of the intensity of US air attacks, the Communists managed to keep the trail open continually throughout the war.<sup>41</sup>

The Sihanoukville route made use of existing Cambodian transportation networks to get supplies to the border. Chinese and Soviet freighters would unload supplies at the port of Sihanoukville. From there, Cambodian trucking firms would take the materials up the "Friendship Highway," ironically built by American aid,<sup>42</sup> to Communist pickup zones in eastern Cambodia. During times of Cambodian-North Vietnamese rapprochement, Sihanouk even allowed the Communists to use hospital facilities along the route. Prior to 1970, the Sihanoukville route received no US air attacks and was thus safe and extremely valuable to the Communist war effort.<sup>43</sup>

Due to a lack of intelligence collection, US estimates of the amount of material flowing through this route were consistently low. Henry Kissinger wrote, "There were, however, disturbingly large disagreements within the intelligence community over . . . the importance of Cambodia, particularly the port of Sihanoukville, as a supply route.

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<sup>41</sup>Tho, 20.

<sup>42</sup>Shawcross, 64.

<sup>43</sup>Tho, 21.

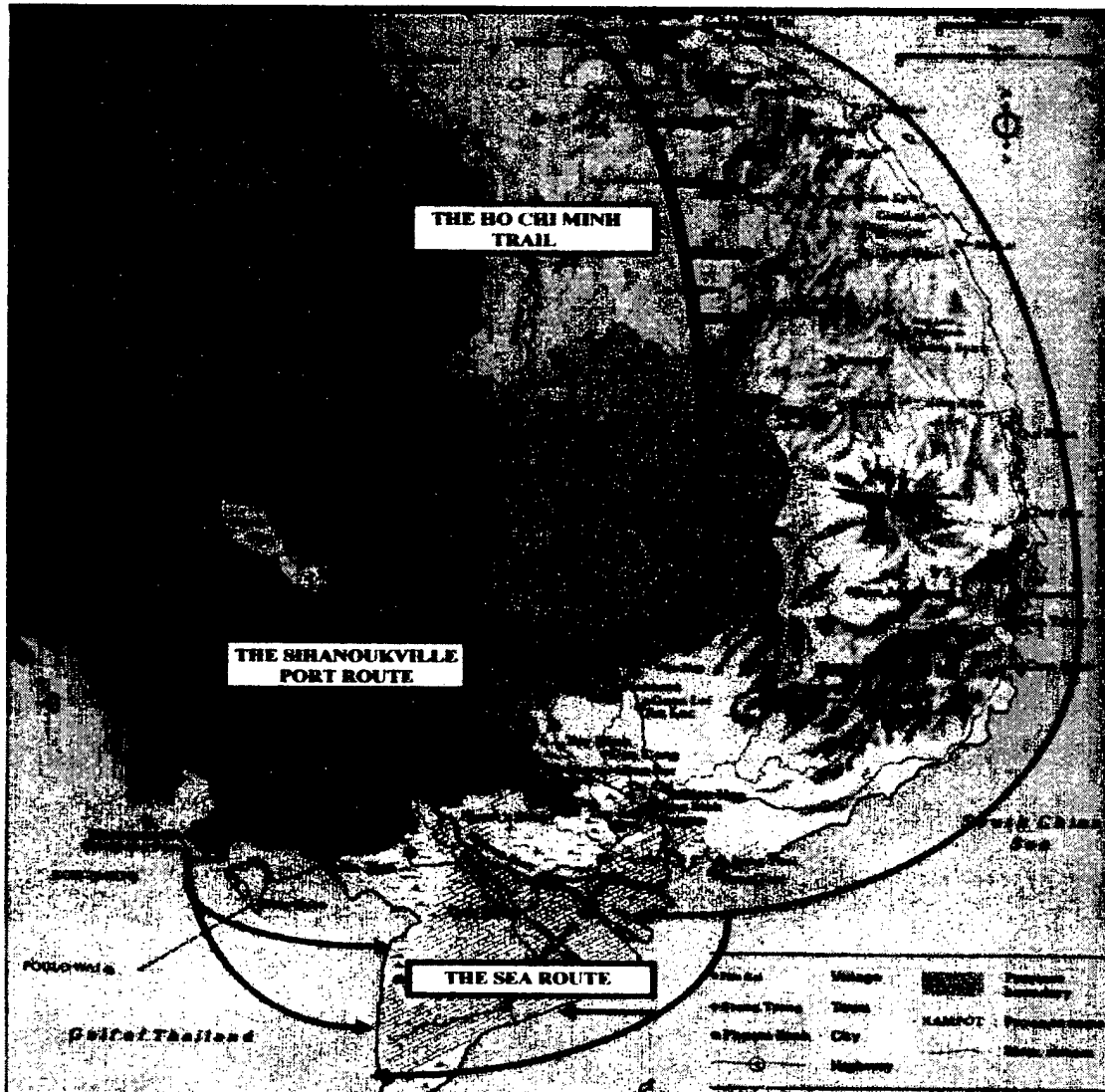


Figure 3. Major Communist Infiltration Routes



The answers made clear that there was no consensus as to facts, much less to (US government) policy.”<sup>44</sup> Documents found in Communist storage dumps during the 1970 incursions indicated that shipments through Cambodia far exceeded even the largest estimates of the US military.<sup>45</sup>

At key locations along the supply system, the Communists erected large base areas. These administration and logistics facilities were concentrated in remote regions of eastern Cambodia and Laos. Hidden among these base areas was the Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN). COSVN served as the headquarters for the entire Communist war effort directed from Cambodia. Through COSVN, the North Vietnamese controlled both their NVA regular forces and the Viet Cong.<sup>46</sup>

The existence of COSVN supported US contentions that the war was not simply a domestic uprising of southern Communists, but a conventional war of aggression controlled by North Vietnam in violation of the Geneva Accords. The US government believed the discovery and destruction of this facility would have tremendous propaganda value, as well as a crippling effect on the North Vietnamese’s ability to wage the war. Over time, COSVN became an important goal, and eventually an obsession, for politicians and commanders desperate for a decisive victory over the Communists.

American conceptions of exactly what composed COSVN reflected a misunderstanding of NVA command and control. The American media, fed by over

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<sup>44</sup>Kissinger, *White House Years*, 238.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>46</sup>Tho, 6.

enthusiastic intelligence analysts, conjured up images of a "Pentagon East." According to *Newsweek*, COSVN consisted of a "fortified, reinforced concrete bunker with a staff of 2,300 organized into an elaborate series of bureaucratic sections."<sup>47</sup>

While intelligence reports and captured documents confirmed the existence of a unified command location, COSVN's portrayal as a static location did not fit with prior Communist strategies of mobility and flexibility. Just prior to the 1970 incursions, members of MACV Intelligence believed they had the COSVN bunker pinpointed to a 1000 meter square.<sup>48</sup> This forecasting would return to haunt the Cambodian operation.

The Allies identified over twenty major base areas along the Cambodian border. As well as serving logistical purposes, most of these bases became a home for various Communist combat units during periods of intense Allied pressure. From these sanctuaries, NVA and VC units funneled supplies throughout South Vietnam and staged attacks on remote Allied forces with relative impunity (figure 4).<sup>49</sup>

Not surprisingly, the presence of these bases frustrated US commanders and politicians. Throughout the late 1960's, MACV asked Washington for permission to destroy the sanctuaries. Nebulous signals from Sihanouk that he would secretly tolerate limited bombing of border areas added urgency to these requests.<sup>50</sup> Although it would be over a year before American troops would openly venture into Cambodia, 1968 and 1969

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<sup>47</sup>*Newsweek* quoted in Doyle and Lipsman, 166

<sup>48</sup>Doyle and Lipsman, 167.

<sup>49</sup>Tho, 23, 26.

<sup>50</sup>Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Brown and Company, 1982) 79.



## CHAPTER 3

### SECRET BOMBINGS AND THE PLANNING OF OPERATION ROCKCRUSHER

At the time I believed the decision to operate in secrecy was a bad mistake. It placed the military in an impossible position, having literally to lie publicly about a perfectly legitimate wartime operation.<sup>1</sup>

General (Retired) Bruce Palmer Jr.

The B-52 Stratofortress missions, code-named Arclight, served as a relatively common means of engaging the Communists in 1968 and 1969. Sometimes, as in the Ia Drang Valley when maneuver forces isolated a large enemy troop concentration, Arclight was devastating. Usually, the heavy bombers were employed against NVA targets out of contact with friendly forces.<sup>2</sup> Because sophisticated means of targeting were rarely available; the bombers conducted saturation missions on likely enemy high payoff targets.<sup>3</sup> Given the terrain of Southeast Asia, the effects of these strikes were often indecisive.

On a typical mission, six B-52s would depart the island of Guam. Climbing to a cruising altitude of 30,000 feet, the aircraft then leveled off for the five-hour flight to Indochina. Midair refueling over the South China Sea provided a brief break to the otherwise routine flight plan. Upon entering South Vietnamese airspace, ground-based

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky), 97.

<sup>2</sup>Robert M. Gipp, "Counterinsurgency from 30,000 Feet: The B-52 in Vietnam," *Air University Review*, 19, no. 2 (January-February 1968): 13.

<sup>3</sup>Army Historical Series, *American Military History* (Washington, D.C: US Army Center of Military History), 683.

controllers took over navigation and air space coordination. The bombers assumed attack formation as controllers confirmed final target coordinates. The B-52s approached a two by one-half mile target "box," each plane carrying with up to thirty tons of high explosives.<sup>4</sup> Bomb bay doors opened as the ground controller signaled to the bombardier, "Five--four--three--two--one--HAC." As "HAC" crackled over the bombardier's headset, eighty olive drab "chains of thunder"<sup>5</sup> fell from the Stratofortress.

Impacting in a five-kilometer rectangle, the bombs created huge craters in the terrain below. Within the box, little survived that was not deeply buried or heavily fortified. Occasionally, a secondary explosion, presumably of enemy war materials informed the crew of the possible effect of the raid. As the dust settled on the target area, the pilots nosed their bombers back to Guam.

In October 1968, departing President Lyndon Johnson announced cessation of the bombing campaign of North Vietnam. This gesture of de-escalation carried the condition that South Vietnamese population centers would also not be attacked. The NVA responded by commencing a "post-Tet" offensive directed at retaining their strategic initiative. The attacks included 115 rocket and mortar barrages on military and civilian targets in South Vietnam including Saigon, Danang, and Hue. This combined with the massing of almost 30,000 NVA and VC in Cambodia posed an immediate risk to the plans of the incoming Nixon administration. Elected in part due to disengagement

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<sup>4</sup>Raphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff, ed., *The Air War in Indochina* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 56.

<sup>5</sup>Testimony of a VC "soldier-poet" in Gipp, 17.

promises, President Nixon set military planners on creating conditions for Vietnamization and withdrawal.<sup>6</sup>

On 18 March 1969, controllers relayed new coordinates to an eight bombers destined for another mission in South Vietnam. These coordinates came through a special security channel and corresponded to Communist Base Area 353 in the Fishhook region of the Cambodian border. Due to the delicate political status of Cambodia, only a select few in MACV and the Pentagon knew of the raid's actual location. The planes headed toward authorized targets within South Vietnam, veering over the border for a few brief minutes to deliver their payloads. On return to base, false reports were filed through standard communication channels reflecting a mission inside South Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> This raid and nearly 500<sup>8</sup> others to follow fell under the Pentagon's designation of MENU.

The NCA's approval to execute Menu in 1969 stemmed from growing frustrations with the situation along the border. Western antiwar sentiment and the tremendous cost of involvement demanded that President Nixon make good on his promise to phase the US out of Vietnam. The scheduled force reduction of 100,000 US troops by April 1970<sup>9</sup> with its associated Vietnamization programs became the primary

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<sup>6</sup>"Bombing in Cambodia," 131.

<sup>7</sup>William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 23.

<sup>8</sup>"Bombing in Cambodia," *Hearings before the Senate Committee on Armed Services* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1973), 483, 487.

<sup>9</sup>David Fulghum and Terrence Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial: The Vietnam Experience* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1981), 23.

strategic priority. This attracted the attention not only of a war-weary America, but also an opportunistic North Vietnam. Communist disruption of redeployment plans could create disastrous consequences for the Nixon administration.

Despite tremendous operational setbacks in the failed Tet offensive of 1968, Communist planners put together a strategy to exploit the US withdrawal. Preventing the Americans from dictating the tempo of the war became a central concern to the North Vietnamese High Command. Through a two-prong strategy of bargaining at the Paris Peace Accords and harassing US and ARVN units in the field, the NVA sought to accelerate America's separation from the war. Vietnamization, a sham to the North Vietnamese, would collapse and with it, the South Vietnamese government.

COSVN Resolution Number 9, issued in July 1969, formally announced the new North Vietnamese strategy. Taking the brutal lesson of Tet to heart, the Communists renounced former attempts at a single large victory in favor of limited engagements. Resolution Number 9 reiterated past successes of flexibility and political initiatives. Tactics changed from battalion-sized assaults to smaller actions including heavy use of infiltrators (sappers) and mortar attacks.<sup>10</sup>

The strategy consisted of three discrete objectives. First, Communist forces would disrupt disengaging American units. Through concerted small unit actions, the North Vietnamese would force the US to be denied the chance to gradually de-escalate the war from a position of strength. The Americans would continue to lose their will to

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<sup>10</sup>Tran Dinh Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion* (Washington, DC: US Army Center for Military History, 1979), 7.

fight, and completely withdraw support from South Vietnam. Second, ARVN forces would receive the brunt of Communist pressure. Replacement units were to be isolated and neutralized so they could not assume the responsibilities of the departing Americans. The third objective consisted of a massive drive to improve existing Communist military and political structures damaged during Tet. This included upgrading logistics bases in Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam, expanding Viet Cong recruitment and weakening the South Vietnamese civil service.<sup>11</sup>

Faced with an uncooperative enemy, MACV and Washington reviewed contingencies to respond to the North Vietnamese strategy. Two constants guided their plans: troop redeployments would remain on schedule and Vietnamization milestones would be met. US advisors worked feverishly to train the ARVN to fill its expanding role. Washington made diplomatic gestures toward Sihanouk intent on getting him to oppose the Communist sanctuaries. South Vietnamese villagers received training and arms under the People's Self-Defense Program.<sup>12</sup> Remaining US units focused on larger, more conventional operations designed to reduce pressure on Vietnamization.<sup>13</sup>

Based on recommendations from MACV calling for stronger measures and knowing that the public would not tolerate an increase in troops, President Nixon secretly ordered the JCS to review bombing contingencies.<sup>14</sup> Signals from Prince Sihanouk

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<sup>11</sup>Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 310.

<sup>12</sup>Tho, 3.

<sup>13</sup>Donn A. Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1978), 168.

<sup>14</sup>Kissinger, 247.



implied that bombing might be tolerated provided Cambodians were not put at risk. Intelligence reports revealed an influx of four NVA divisions in Cambodia. The missions gained urgency when MACV sent the following report on 9 February 1969: "recent information developed from photo reconnaissance and a CHU HOI (Viet Cong deserter) gives us hard intelligence on COSVN headquarters facilities in Base Area 353."<sup>15</sup>

The target list went sealed to President Nixon's desk for final approval. The Joint Chiefs of Staff selected Menu targets on intelligence gathered by numerous sources including high- and low-level aerial reconnaissance and clandestine cross border reconnaissance patrols. Planners chose suitable targets providing that they did not contain "sizable concentrations of Cambodian military and civilian populations."<sup>16</sup> Menu consisted of six target areas: Breakfast, Lunch, Snack, Dinner, Dessert, and Supper (see table).

From March 1969 to May 1970, these clandestine air strikes targeted the six base areas inside Cambodia. Judging by Sihanouk's tolerance of the strikes, collateral damage to Cambodian was acceptable. Yet the Chiefs admitted in later congressional testimony, "some Cambodian casualties would be sustained in the operation. The surprise effect of attacks could tend to increase casualties, as could the probable lack of protective shelters

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<sup>15</sup>MACV memorandum released under the Freedom of Information Act as quoted in Shawcross, 19.

<sup>16</sup>JCS Memorandum quoted in Shawcross, 28-29.

around Cambodian homes.”<sup>17</sup> The NVA, publicly denying its presence in Cambodia, remained silent.

Table. Menu Air Strikes 18 March 1969 to 26 May 1970

Sanctuary	Code Name	Estimated Number of Cambodians	Number of Sorties
Base Area 353	Breakfast	1,640	228
Base Area 609	Lunch	198	992
Base Area 351	Snack	383	885
Base Area 352	Dinner	770	817
Base Area 350	Dessert	120	706
Base Area 704	Supper	1,640	247*

*Note:* By 26 May 1970, the overt US incursions precluded the need for additional secrecy or restraint. Menu then expanded into regular Arclight raids throughout Cambodia. \*The JCS did not approve Area 704 for attack, President Nixon chose it for 247 Supper sorties against their recommendations. *Source:* “Bombing in Cambodia,” 172.

Assessment of the effectiveness of Menu proved to be a difficult procedure. Due to the dense terrain and the NVA/VC tactic of tunneling and underground storage, aerial photography often proved unreliable. Ground investigation by small reconnaissance units became the most preferred method of judging Arclight effectiveness.<sup>18</sup> MACV headquarters received this kind of bomb damage assessment from its secretive Studies and Observation Group (SOG) which had been running patrols into Cambodia since 1965.<sup>19</sup> The name of these reconnaissance operations changed from Daniel Boone to

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<sup>17</sup>JCS description of base areas in JCSM-207-69 quoted in Shawcross, 29.

<sup>18</sup>Gipp, 17.

<sup>19</sup>“Bombing in Cambodia,” 19.

Salem House and finally to Thot Not (when the South Vietnamese took over the missions in 1972).

Salem House reconnaissance teams originally consisted of three Special Operations volunteers and up to ten indigenous troops (including Khmer Serei). Often armed with communist AK-47 rifles and clad in the black pajamas of the Viet Cong, American participants were "sterilized" meaning they carried no identification and faced a \$10,000 fine and ten years imprisonment for disclosing any part of the missions.<sup>20</sup> Deaths reportedly occurred "along the border."<sup>21</sup>

Salem House commenced intelligence collection into Cambodia in May of 1967. The patrols initially ran under strict mission restrictions. These limitations generally decreased as the border situation deteriorated. By the time Menu began, MACV authorized helicopter insertion of completely American reconnaissance teams up to thirty kilometers inside Cambodia. US command also lifted restrictions on booby trapping of Communist facilities, but allowed the teams no air support or civilian contact while in Cambodia.<sup>22</sup>

Although these missions were often extremely dangerous, they had rather marginal effect on clarifying the intelligence picture for MACV. From 1967 to 1970, Salem House ran roughly 1,300 patrols into Cambodia and captured only twenty-six

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 236.

<sup>21</sup>Shawcross, 24.

<sup>22</sup>Department of Defense Report to Senate in "Bombing in Cambodia," 493.

prisoners.<sup>23</sup> Colonel (Retired) Rod Paschall, a Special Forces battalion operations officer stationed along the border in 1967 and 1968, reflects on these operations:

There was intelligence gathering (in Cambodia), but I would have to say it was minimal, and I mean minimal. I believe that our lack of knowledge on the extent of support coming into Cambodia from the North Vietnamese was primarily founded on what minimal effort we had on the ground in Cambodia. So these things may sound dramatic and all that sort of business, but when you look back at them they were small activities, very few people involved and the results were not all that good simply because it was a minor operation.<sup>24</sup>

Lieutenant Randolph Harrison served as executive officer on a mission to conduct bomb damage assessment on Base Area 353. The morning following a Breakfast strike, Harrison received orders to take his team into the target box. "We were told that we would go in and pick some of these guys up, if there was anybody still alive out there they would be so stunned that all you will have to do is walk over and lead him by the arm to the helicopter."<sup>25</sup> Captain Bill Orthman, Harrison's friend and team leader, led the ground phase of the mission. Expecting a dazed enemy among the rubble, the team encountered heavy contact. Once the helicopters departed the infiltration point, intense firing commenced from three sides of the landing zone (LZ). Three South Vietnamese immediately went down and Orthman received two rounds to the stomach. Moments later, a bullet ignited a riot gas grenade in Orthman's rucksack. The grenade burst into flames, searing flesh off his arm.<sup>26</sup> The team's radio operator managed to recall the

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Colonel (Ret.) Rod Paschall, former Director of the US Army Center for Military History, interview, Carlisle, PA, 22 December 1986.

<sup>25</sup>Harrison testimony in "Bombing in Cambodia," 245.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 247.

helicopters. One helicopter returned to the LZ, extracting only carrying Harrison, the severely wounded Orthman, and three Vietnamese out of the original twelve-man team.<sup>27</sup>

MACV ordered additional Salem House teams to return to the site immediately afterward. According to the congressional investigation, several of the Vietnamese Salem House troops refused and were arrested. After considerable bargaining, the teams returned in a force of 250 men with tactical air support, violating force limitations. The Communists again drove them out. When asked about the effect of the mission, Harrison related it as similar to "taking a beehive the size of a basketball and poking it with a stick, they were mad."<sup>28</sup>

According to Salem House and other assessments, Menu had a minor effect on the logistics capability of the Communists. Although Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, General Earle Wheeler's testified that the bombing "harassed the enemy, destroyed his supplies, kept him off balance, and relieved pressure on allied forces,"<sup>29</sup> the base areas showed tremendous resiliency. Through dispersion of material, improved protection, camouflage, and expansion deeper into Cambodia, the Communists avoided the worst effects of the air strikes.<sup>30</sup>

Washington was thus faced with three competing realities: an intense national desire to separate from the war, the schedule of Vietnamization, and an aggressive enemy

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<sup>27</sup>Shawcross, 16.

<sup>28</sup>Harrison testimony in "Bombing in Cambodia," 248.

<sup>29</sup>Gipp, 17.

<sup>30</sup>Kissinger, 433.

able to protect its capabilities and maintain a strong offensive capacity. Menu and its associated operations had not lived up to expectations. Aerial reconnaissance continued to show NVA truck convoys moving with impunity from Sihanoukville to the sanctuaries. Fears of a worst case "humiliating defeat" inspired more serious plans to "prevent American retreat from becoming a rout."<sup>31</sup>

To further complicate matters, Cambodian stability continued to deteriorate. By 1970, Prince Sihanouk had essentially lost control over his eastern border. Internally, Cambodia's economic situation stagnated under a flood of Chinese and American imports compounded by internal corruption and black marketeering. In addition, North Vietnamese support of the Khmer Rouge kept the country politically unstable.<sup>32</sup>

Phnom Penh's right-wing faction, led by Prime Minister Lon Nol (appointed in 1969) blamed growing North Vietnamese influence as the root of Cambodia's problems.<sup>33</sup> In March, while Sihanouk vacationed in France, Lon Nol launched an anti-Vietnamese campaign. On March 11th, a huge crowd ransacked the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong embassies in Phnom Penh. Strong evidence shows that the Lon Nol government staged the incident.<sup>34</sup>

After the riot, Lon Nol tersely apologized. In the same speech, however, he made the unenforceable demand that all Vietnamese Communist forces leave Cambodia within

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<sup>31</sup>Edward Doyle and Samuel Lipsman, *Fighting for Time: The Vietnam Experience* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1981), 142.

<sup>32</sup>Don Kirk, "Springtime in Phnom Penh," in Doyle and Lipsman, 148.

<sup>33</sup>Doyle and Lipsman, 142-143.

<sup>34</sup>Shawcross, 118.

seventy-two hours. More seriously for the Communists, Lon Nol closed the port of Sihanoukville and shut down the rice trade. Sihanouk, now in Moscow, dismissed messengers sent by Lon Nol informing him of the grave national situation. The following day, Cambodia's chief of ground defense launched an unsuccessful coup against Lon Nol. Thinking Sihanouk inspired this, Lon Nol forced a meeting of parliament and, on March 18th, Prince Sihanouk lost power to Lon Nol's "Government of National Salvation."<sup>35</sup>

Despite allegations by Sihanouk, the US had little direct involvement with the engineering of the coup.<sup>36</sup> William Colby, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency said, "I don't know of any specific assurances he was given but the obvious conclusion for him, given the political situation in South Vietnam and Laos, was that he would be given US support."<sup>37</sup> Washington did provide some logistical assistance and immediately sought opportunities to use the new regime in its fight against the North Vietnamese. After initially wavering, Lon Nol, opened up to the US, receiving recognition and support.

Prince Sihanouk retaliated, forming a government-in-exile in China and opposing the new government as "a traitorous group." Shifting from his anti-Vietnamese rhetoric, he now excused the NVA/VC presence in Cambodia as "resisting American imperialists"

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<sup>35</sup>Kissinger, 467.

<sup>36</sup>Shawcross, 122.

<sup>37</sup>Kissinger, 467.

and called for the formation of a United Front against Lon Nol.<sup>38</sup> Sihanouk's Communist allies, including the previously suppressed Khmer Rouge, eagerly obliged the Prince. In late March, the North Vietnamese initiated "Campaign X," redeploying four divisions from border base areas to strategic locations throughout Cambodia. These units had instructions to keep the trail systems open, expand "liberated" zones within Cambodia, and develop Sihanouk's United Front into a viable pro-North Vietnamese fighting force.<sup>39</sup>

By 3 April, NVA and VC forces began attacking remote Cambodian Army units. On April 10th, Cambodian troops evacuated the Parrot's Beak portion of the border. Two weeks later, the Communists were threatening several eastern provincial capitals.<sup>40</sup> Receiving limited US aid, Lon Nol's poorly trained army suffered against the veteran Communists. As one European diplomat gloomily predicted: "The Vietcong will be in Phnom Penh in six days. I am going on vacation for this month. When I come back in June, we'll have to start all over again working up biographies of the new leaders."<sup>41</sup>

Only one month prior to the US ground incursions, the Vietnamese Communists and the resurgent Khmer Rouge already threatened nearly half of Cambodia. As the country verged on collapse, armed confrontation between Khmer and Vietnamese

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<sup>38</sup>Fulgman and Maitland, 13.

<sup>39</sup>Kissinger, 467.

<sup>40</sup>T. D. Allman, "Better Dead than Red," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7 May 1970, 21.

<sup>41</sup>Doyle and Lipsman, 144.



reopened ancient animosities. Paranoia surrounding the imminent fall of Phnom Penh increased hostility toward Cambodia's 400,000 ethnic Vietnamese.

The Cambodian government pushed anti-Vietnamese sentiment to a fever pitch not seen in centuries. Lon Nol charged all Cambodia's Vietnamese with being NVA/VC supporters. The government imposed a 6:00 P.M. curfew on Vietnamese in Phnom Penh to prevent "subversive activities." The tiny Royal Cambodian Air Force, rather than fighting the NVA, dropped leaflets recalling old rebellions "when Khmers once rose up and killed all Annamese [Vietnamese] on Cambodian soil."<sup>42</sup>

As the NVA and VC continued Campaign X, the frustrated Cambodian Army used Vietnamese as hostages. On 10 April, government troops executed ninety Vietnamese jammed in a warehouse. One hundred died the following day.<sup>43</sup> Lon Nol's forces continued atrocities on 14 April. Supported even by members of the Buddhist clergy, Cambodian troops machine-gunned nearly a thousand Vietnamese men at Neak Long, tossing them in bundles into the muddy Mekong. For days, bloated bodies clogged the river. A correspondent reported:

The dead, followed by schools of hungry minnows, filled the river for miles, littered the shore, impeded navigation. In one instance, the dead endangered those along the riverbank still lucky to be alive. A group of Vietnamese, all civilians, were penned near the riverbank--their only source of drinking water the floating graveyard which the Mekong had become. The prisoners were forced to drink the fetid water while they waited for their turn to be shot.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Allman, 22.

<sup>44</sup>Doyle and Lipsman, 146-147.

Both Vietnams issued pleas for a stop to the massacres. Many VC returned their families to South Vietnam, considering it a safer alternative to remaining in Cambodia. US and South Vietnamese navies organized an evacuation flotilla, which would reach Phnom Penh ten days after the incursions commenced. Lon Nol explained away the executions as overzealous attempts to destroy VC infiltrators and called for assistance against the Communists.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the massacres, Lon Nol received increased US support. Already the US had secretly sent his government almost \$8 million of captured small arms. Several Khmer Serei units "defected" to Cambodia to fortify Lon Nol's army.<sup>46</sup> By mid-April, ARVN Ranger units launched several cross border raids at VC base camps, the largest, Toan Thang 41, occurring at the Angel's Wing in III Corps Tactical Zone.

With little reaction from Lon Nol or world opinion, the administration believed conditions existed to launch a major cross border operation. As May approached, the long delayed opportunity to strike at the sanctuaries showed potential. The wet monsoon season that would turn the border roads into mud was still over a month away.

After a week of consultation with his military and political advisors, President Nixon approved execution of an "incursion" of limited duration and scope.<sup>47</sup> Attempting to avoid accusations of war expansion, the administration approved what was essentially

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<sup>45</sup>Richard Egan, "Sixty Days in Cambodia," *The National Observer*, 29 June 1970 in *The Senate Congressional Record*, 21915.

<sup>46</sup>Doyle and Lipsman, 146.

<sup>47</sup>Palmer, 101.

a very large cross-border raid. This would be done without Lon Nol's consideration or approval. The planning for Rockcrusher now began in earnest.

On 19 April General Creighton Abrams, the MACV Commander, informed his field force commanders to prepare contingencies for an immediate invasion into Cambodia. Abrams described the operation as a broad series of limited attacks along the border conducted by US and ARVN forces. MACV headquarters and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff envisioned the main attack as six overt actions near the Fishhook and Parrot's Beak regions of the Cambodian border. They numbered the offensives Toan Thang (Total Victory) 42 through 46 (figure 5).<sup>48</sup>

The lack of a single centralized headquarters for US and ARVN forces created a somewhat confusing geographical command structure. For purposes of planning and coordination, the ARVN developed four Corps Tactical Zones (CTZs) numbered sequentially from the Demilitarized Zone in the north to the southern peninsula of Vietnam. US forces adopted these zones maneuvering and deploying forces between them based on operational requirements. The Toan Thang operations occurred in III CTZ as part of the larger effort along the entire Cambodian border (figure 6). American units, with two exceptions, attacked only from III CTZ. ARVN forces, free from Washington's restraint, planned and executed incursions along the entire length of the border and well into eastern Cambodia.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Tho, 71.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 22.

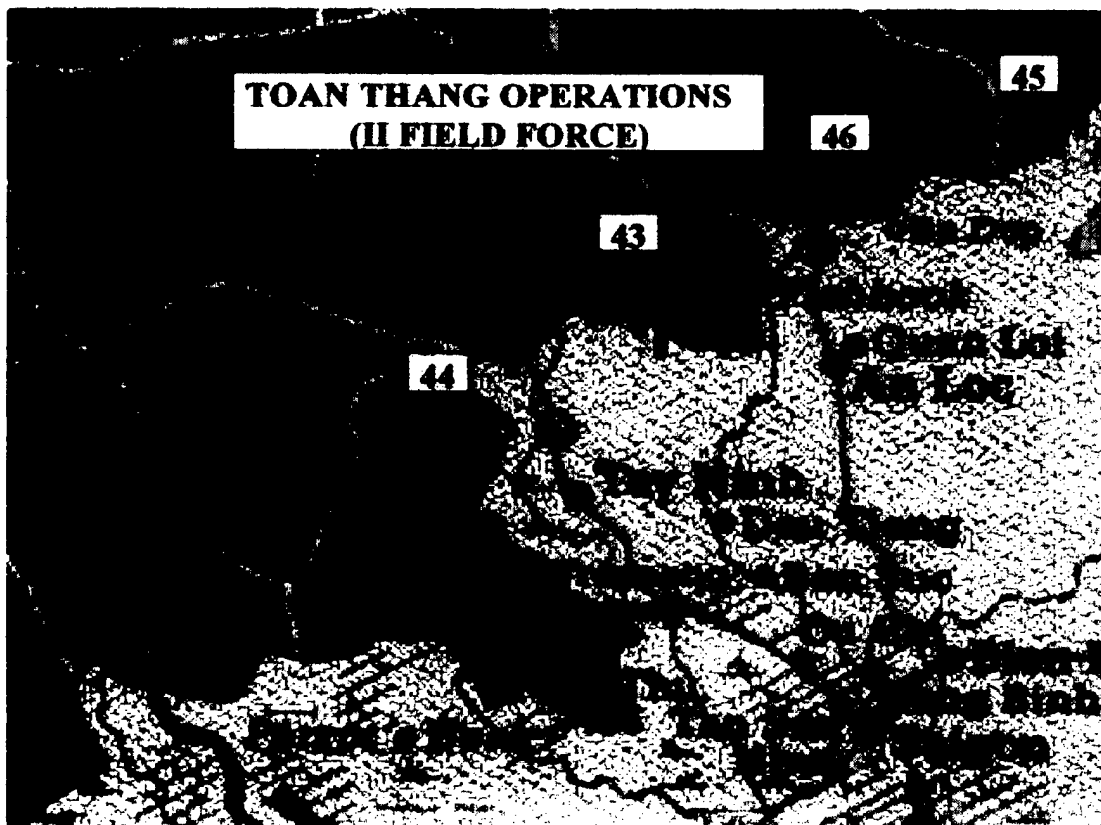


Figure 5. II Field Force Cross Border Operations (Toan Thang 43-46)

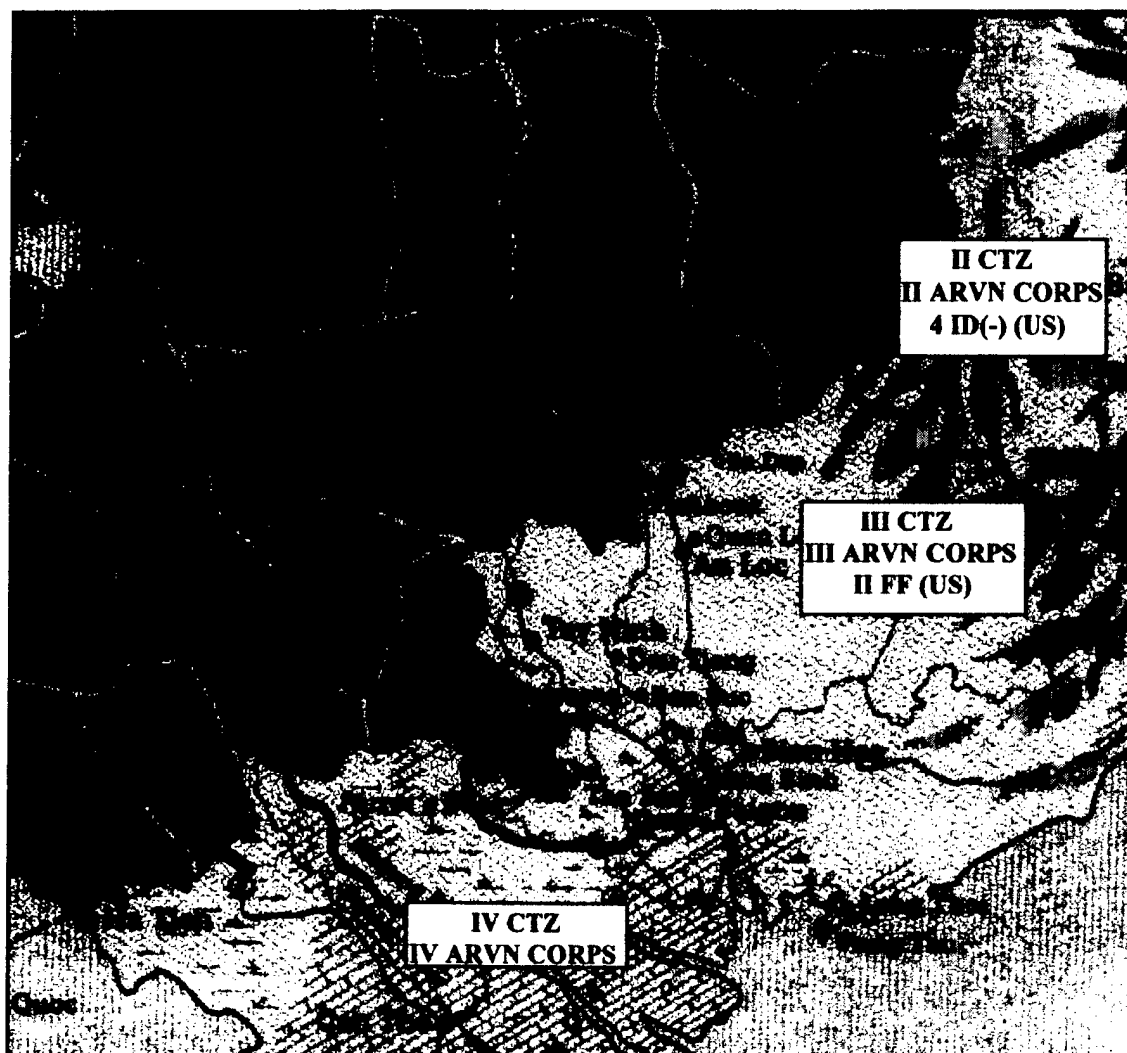


Figure 6. Cambodian Incursions (II, III, and IV Corps Tactical Zones)

Toan Thang 41 and 42 targeted the Parrot's Beak region south of the Fishhook. These operations, conducted solely by ARVN ground forces, would commence two days prior to US involvement and remain long after US forces departed. The remaining Toan Thang offensives roughly centered on the Fishhook.<sup>50</sup> These involved a combination of US and ARVN troops and varied in intensity and scope.

American units in III CTZ fell under the overall designation of the II US Field Force, commanded by Lieutenant General Michael S. Davison. Essentially a corps-sized element, II Field Force consisted of over 25,000 troops from the following units:

US: 1st Cavalry Division  
25th Infantry Division  
3d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division  
11th Armored Cavalry Regiment  
17th Air Cavalry Regiment  
12th Aviation Brigade

Allied:  
Royal Thai Division  
ANZAC Task Force<sup>51</sup>

\*ARVN forces from III Corps routinely task organized for operations under II Field Force control.

As the senior US officer, Davison also functioned as chief advisor to the ARVN units in III CTZ.<sup>52</sup> Davison's staff and their ARVN counterparts immediately began planning for the operation, focusing on the massive air, ground, and logistical support

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 71.

<sup>51</sup>Davison, interview from Senior Officer Debrief Program, 2 February 1976, Michael S. Davison Papers.

<sup>52</sup>Shelby L. Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle* (Washington, DC: US News Books, 1981), 60.

required to sustain the fighting units. Davison chose the 1st Cavalry Division as the spearhead, supplementing its capabilities with other II Field Force assets.

Major General Elvy B. Roberts, Commanding General of the 1st Cavalry, received notification on 24 April to begin planning for Rockcrusher. Initial details and intelligence were extremely vague, leading to a belief that the operation would be at most a three to five day raid.<sup>53</sup> The II Field Force and MACV issued instructions for operational security, which included no reconnaissance or overflights of the objective. This and an extremely limited supply of maps strained planners, particularly at the tactical levels. Nevertheless, within four days, the division staff completed the operations order and initial preparations.

The division established a Task Force around 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division specifically for Rockcrusher. Task Force Shoemaker, named after "Handsome Bob" Shoemaker the Assistant Division Commander for maneuver, denoted this composite unit. In addition to the 3d brigade (2-5, 1-7, and 2-7 Cavalry Squadrons – so named, but actually infantry battalions), Task Force Shoemaker consisted of:

- 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR)
- 1st ARVN Armored Cavalry Regiment
- 3d Brigade, ARVN Airborne Division
- 2-47 Infantry Battalion (Mechanized) from the 3d Bde, 9th Infantry Division
- 2-34 Armor Battalion (-) from the 25th Division
- 3-4 Cavalry Squadron from the 25th Division<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Recommendation for Presidential Unit Citation, 1st Cavalry Division, Elvy B. Roberts Papers.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

Artillery and other divisional support assets fell under task force control. The 1-9 Air Cavalry and other attack aviation assets remained under division control in direct support of Shoemaker. Remaining elements of the 1st Cavalry Division supported the operation through security missions inside South Vietnam or were held in reserve for later thrusts into Cambodia.<sup>55</sup>

The large number of Communist troops reported to be based immediately in and near the Fishhook caused General Davison to take the threat of a counterattack very seriously. As Fishhook appeared to be the site of COSVN, intelligence reports tended to overestimate NVA and VC combat strength. The bulk of Communist forces in the area consisted of headquarters, logistical, and administrative elements. Combat troops included three or four sapper-reconnaissance battalions, two infantry battalions, an anti-aircraft battalion, and an artillery battalion. These forces totaled over 7,500 troops.<sup>56</sup> Far more worrisome, however, was the capability of the Communists to mobilize almost 10,000 reinforcement troops within a week should they decide to fight.

Although US planners considered the possibility of dispersal and withdrawal by these units, several factors pointed to a coordinated and aggressive defense. Three NVA regiments operating within South Vietnam would have to retreat through attacking allied units to get to Cambodia. The approaching monsoons and political limitations set upon US forces betrayed the limited nature of the incursions. Allied commanders believed this could influence the Communists to defend the base areas if they felt the initial thrust

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<sup>55</sup>Lipsman and Doyle, 164.

<sup>56</sup>G-2 Estimate, Elvy B. Roberts Papers.



could be stopped.<sup>57</sup> Intelligence indicated the NVA possessed well-prepared defenses and a rehearsed counterstrategy for an allied invasion. Despite all these indications of what NVA intentions, decisive engagement was by no means certain.

The NVA in the Fishhook was a well-equipped light infantry force. Colonel Starry recalled, "We had reports of extensive bunker systems, antitank weapons, antiaircraft guns. We knew that two regiments of NVA straddled the border in the area we had to go through."<sup>58</sup> Judging from NVA bases, discovered on the South Vietnamese side of the border, the Communists possessed well-fortified and camouflaged defenses in Cambodia. Salem House patrols found the sanctuaries mined and heavily guarded. Not content with the jungle for concealment, the NVA put the majority of their facilities underground. These preparations gave the NVA a formidable defensive advantage should they chose to use it.<sup>59</sup>

Although Southeast Asia typically conjures visions of triple canopy jungle, rice paddies and steep mountains, the terrain immediately around the Fishhook differed. The area, largely flat and, by April, at the peak of the dry season, provided conventional US forces with ground favorable for armored and mechanized maneuver. The jungle, not as thick as in coastal regions, gave way to several roads and large plantations left from French colonial days.<sup>60</sup> As a result, Task Force Shoemaker's composition reflected the

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., Intelligence Summary, II FF, Michael S. Davison Papers.

<sup>58</sup>Starry interview quoted in Lipsman and Doyle, 164.

<sup>59</sup>G-2 Studies, Annex A, The NVA Logistics System, Elvy B. Roberts Papers.

<sup>60</sup>Starry, 169.

desire of both Roberts and Davison to make use of weapons and tactics rarely suited for Vietnam.

The invasion force relied on a large number of helicopters and armored vehicles to complete its mission within the deadline of 30 June. With the monsoons still over a month away, the speed and firepower of these weapons could be exploited beyond the limited road network. Thus the 1st Cavalry staff planned a rapid double envelopment designed to keep the NVA and VC forces on the defensive and unable to mount an effective counterattack.<sup>61</sup>

Two battalions of 1st Cavalry troops and the 9th ARVN Airborne brigade were to air assault in ahead of advancing armored columns. These troops were responsible for occupying blocking positions as well as constructing fire support bases for Shoemaker's artillery assets. The 1-9 Air Cavalry Squadron had the mission of screening the limit of advance and collecting information through aerial reconnaissance.

On the South Vietnamese side of the border, an ARVN armored cavalry unit would guard likely escape routes toward South Vietnam. Plans to employ road craters, blown bridges, ground sensors, and persistent CS gas (a nauseous and slow-degrading form of riot gas) completed the trap.<sup>62</sup> All these preparations would ideally create a box around NVA and VC units, forcing them into a confrontation and preventing the evacuation of COSVN and supply depots known to be in the area.

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<sup>61</sup>Lipsman and Doyle, 164.

<sup>62</sup>G-2 Report, Elvy B. Roberts Papers.

Within the box, M-113 armored personnel carriers, M-48 medium tanks, and Sheridan armored reconnaissance vehicles would advance to the pre-positioned air assault units. The shock effect of these heavy forces would act as the hammer against the waiting anvil of the air assault troops. Perhaps overstating his case, a US officer told reporters: "This Cambodian operation is pure blitzkrieg like something from a World War II Panzer division's book of tactics" (figure 7).<sup>63</sup>

The concept of the operation fell into five distinct planning phases.<sup>64</sup> First, allied forces would assume attack positions within South Vietnam, while B-52s, fighter-bombers, and artillery struck likely enemy troop concentrations. Second, units would push to their initial objectives, forming the box. In Phase III, Allied units would locate, engage, and destroy Communist forces and equipment. This phase would concentrate on preventing NVA escape deeper into Cambodia. Fourth, follow-up operations would focus on the discovery and removal of supply caches. Finally, consistent with the date limitation set by President Nixon, a phased withdrawal of all US units would end by 29 June.

Planners went to great lengths to insure the element of surprise, essential for this operation. Despite this, repositioning of artillery units, a sudden demand for Cambodian maps, and the presence of an unusually high number of senior officers near the border caused leaks. Mark Pritchard, an aviation technician in the 1st Cavalry related how in

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<sup>63</sup>Interview quoted in Lipsman and Doyle, 164.

<sup>64</sup>Operations Summary, Elvy B. Roberts Papers.

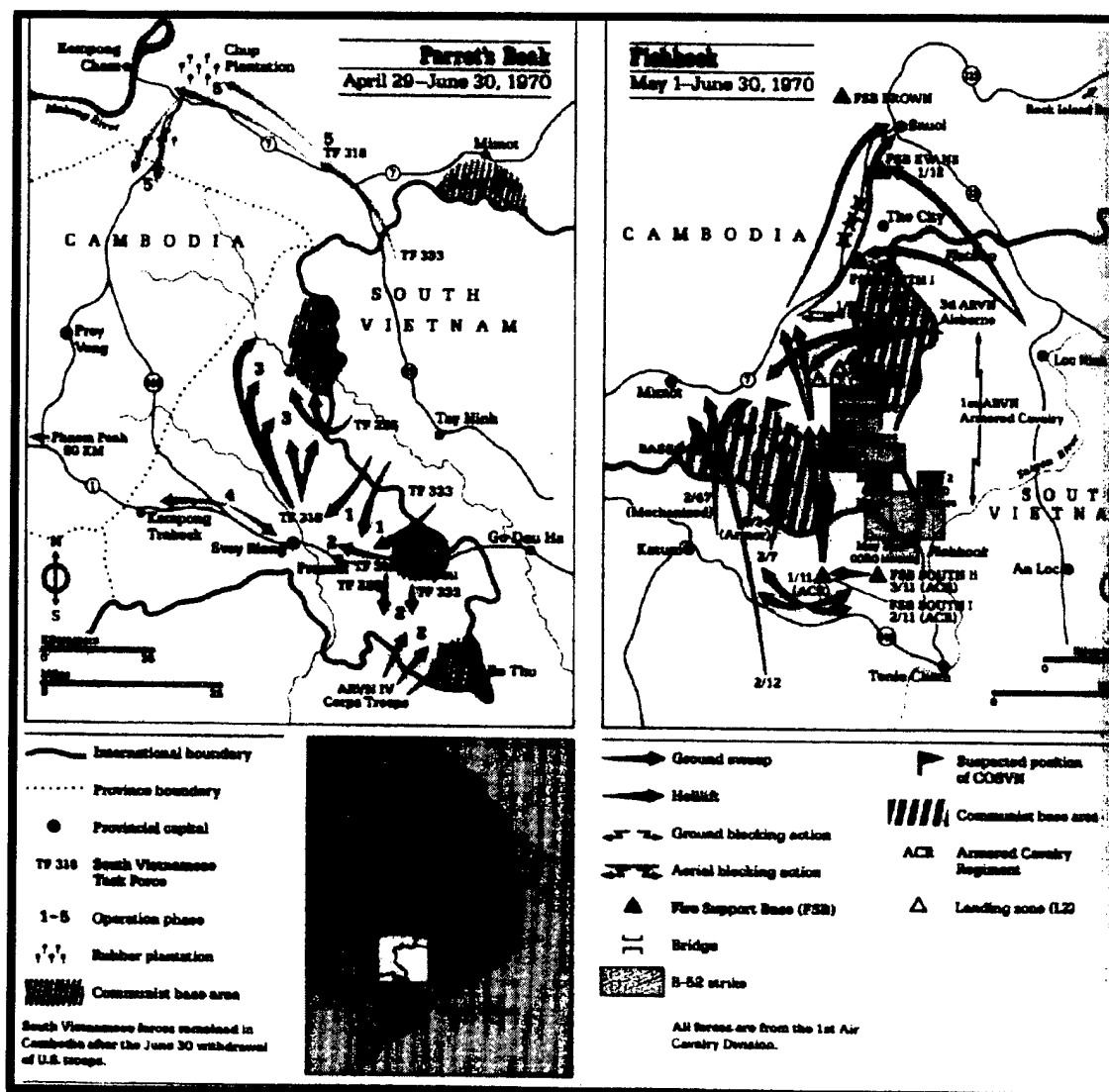


Figure 7. Operation Rockcrusher Concept

late April "a plane flew in and a bunch of generals got out--we don't usually get generals up in that area. I knew something was up. . . . Every helicopter we had was being made ready, hundreds more than I've ever seen in one place in my life."<sup>65</sup> According to Colonel Starry, surprise became an impossible objective. "As in any big operation, the

<sup>65</sup>Briefing comment quoted in Lipsman and Doyle, 164.

support units in the rear were informed first; the enemy definitely knew of the attack.”<sup>66</sup>

This lack of operational security gave the Communists time to evacuate some of their forces, frustrating allied commanders eager for a major confrontation.

Major General Roberts reported his portion of Rockcrusher, Toan Thang 43, execution on 29 April. On that day, Toan Thang 42 commenced in the Parrot’s Beak under the able command of Lieutenant General Do Cao Tri. Here, the NVA fought a stubborn delaying action against the ARVN.<sup>67</sup> This initial contact led Lieutenant General Davison to expect similar resistance at the Fishhook. At his request, Air Force liaisons planned Arclight to precede Shoemaker’s advance.

A last minute debate between the administration and members of Congress delayed launch of the attack for twenty-four hours.<sup>68</sup> Preparation continued around the clock for a new D-day of 1 May. By that afternoon, Brigadier General Shoemaker established his tactical command post at Quan Loi.<sup>69</sup> MACV confirmed attack time to coincide with President Nixon’s address to the nation at 9:00 P.M., eastern standard time. The opportunity to strike the sanctuaries, so long delayed, was finally at hand.

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<sup>66</sup>Starry, 169n.

<sup>67</sup>Lipsman and Doyle, 173.

<sup>68</sup>Keith W. Nolan, *Into Cambodia* (New York: Dell Publishers), 100.

<sup>69</sup>Recommendation for Presidential Unit Citation, 1st Cavalry, Elvy B. Roberts Papers.

## CHAPTER 4

### OPERATION ROCKCRUSHER

“You know, you never defeated us on the battlefield,” said the American colonel. The North Vietnamese colonel replied, “That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.”<sup>1</sup>

Colonel Harry Summers, *On Strategy*

Phase I of Rockcrusher technically began on 28 April 1970--three days before “D-day.” That morning, Major General Roberts received orders from Lieutenant General Davison to prepare for the operation. Still envisioning a limited raid, Roberts met with his ARVN counterpart, reviewed the suspected enemy situation and developed the composition and mission of Task Force Shoemaker. Meanwhile, the division staff refined contingency plans for the expansion of operations in Cambodia.

Ordered to the border, the 3/11 ACR was pulled from its patrolling duties on Route 14 and raced 145 kilometers in 18 hours to join her sister squadrons.<sup>2</sup> On the 29th of April, the remaining units comprising Task Force Shoemaker moved to the final staging areas. Elements of the 25th Infantry Division (25th ID) filled in the most critical vacancies caused by units committed to the attack. The 1/11 ACR and 3-4 Cavalry Squadron, attached from the 25th ID, would augment this effort in Vietnam until after the initial assaults. Roberts reported Rockcrusher ready for execution that afternoon.

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<sup>1</sup>Conversation on 25 April 1975 in Hanoi between Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., then Chief Negotiations Division, US Delegation, Four Party Joint Military Team and Colonel Tu, Chief, North Vietnamese Delegation in Harry Summers, *On Strategy* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1982), 21.

<sup>2</sup>“Cross Border Attack into Cambodia,” Lessons Learned, 11th ACR, Donn A. Starry Papers, US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA

Also on 29 April ARVN forces launched Toan Thang 42 in the Parrot's Beak and Angel's Wing sections of the border. The ARVN planned and conducted the offensive with more autonomy than seen in previous offensives. Only about one hundred US advisors accompanied the ARVN. Thus, MACV appeared to regard the attacks as an important test for Vietnamization.<sup>3</sup> The flamboyant and aggressive South Vietnamese General Do Cao Tri led these operations. The general, complete with sunglasses, a shoulder-holstered .38-caliber pistol, and a swagger stick boasted, "if the VC get too close, I'll use my stick on the them."<sup>4</sup> Tri, dubbed "the Patton of Parrot's Beak" by *Time* magazine showed a willingness to engage NVA forces rare among ARVN senior commanders. His leadership, combined with US support, led to a strong initial performance by the ARVN. By the end of the day, thanks in part to US air strikes, Tri's forces accomplished all initial objectives. Despite strong resistance, the Communists lost over 130 troops versus only 16 ARVN soldiers killed in action.<sup>5</sup>

On 30 April, one day prior to the revised D-day of 1 May, Task Force Shoemaker completed final combat preparations. The 1st Cavalry Division moved its forward command post to Quan Lon near the border. The 3d ARVN Airborne Brigade received additional troops that would assist it in establishing fire support bases the following morning. The 2-34 Armor Battalion (2-34 AR) (minus two tank companies) and 2-37

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<sup>3</sup>Edward Doyle and Samuel Lipsman, *Fighting for Time: The Vietnam Experience* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1981), 174.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Tran Dinh Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion* (Washington, DC: US Army Center for Military History, 1979), 57.

Mechanized Infantry Battalion (2-47 MECH) moved to the staging areas in the vicinity of Katum, coming under the operational control of Shoemaker. Here, they cross attached elements to form Battalion Task Forces ALPHA and BRAVO. The 1st Cavalry Division Artillery opened five forward fire support bases by early evening. The final positioning of the 11th ACR and the heavy task forces ended ground movement in Phase I.<sup>6</sup>

Davison finalized H-hour for ground forces as 7:30 A.M. 1 May 1970. As part of a preparatory bombardment, six separate Arcflight strikes attacked suspected NVA positions within the objective area. "Daisy Cutters," 15,000 pound bombs specially designed to blast holes in the jungle canopy, cleared landing zones for the impending air assaults. By 0600, B-52s gave way to US Air Force close support aircraft and the howitzers of Task Force Shoemaker. During the next two hours, all units moved from their staging areas to assault positions just short of the border. At 0730, as the 3d ARVN began their air assault, the armored and cavalry units of Task Force Shoemaker crossed their lines of departure. At 0945, C/2-47 Mech and A/2-34 Armor became the first American ground combat units to enter Cambodia.<sup>7</sup>

The 1-9th Air Cavalry Regiment (1-9 Cav), conducting reconnaissance and security missions on the western edge of the Fishhook, made contact first. Apparently, the order to evacuate came late to many NVA units, leading to a disorganized withdrawal. Helicopter gunships from the Air Cav killed five NVA soldiers escaping to

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<sup>6</sup>"Operation Toan Thang," First Cavalry Operations Summary, Elvy B. Roberts Papers, US Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA.

<sup>7</sup>G-2 Report, Operations Summary, Elvy B. Roberts Papers.



the west in a truck. This engagement became typical as the day wore on: The unit history records: "1-9th Cavalry had a field day catching small groups of NVA scurrying hither and yon, resulting in a record total of 157 NVA killed by helicopter (on 1 May)."<sup>8</sup>

The initial air assault on LZ east by the 1st Battalion, 3d ARVN Airborne occurred without contact. By the end of the day the ARVN soldiers secured the area for follow-on units. Chinook helicopters from 12th Aviation Brigade slung in supporting artillery batteries from 1st Cavalry Division, quickly converting LZ east into a fire support base. ARVN infantry then began conducting search and destroy operations to gain contact with the NVA.

While artillery and air strikes continued on enemy positions and potential landing zones, troop helicopters supported by Cobra gunships moved more ARVN troops into the Fishhook. As 5th and 9th Battalions, 3d ARVN Airborne air assaulted LZ center, they made initial contact with an estimated 200 NVA regular troops. The tremendous firepower of the supporting Cobra gunships dispersed the NVA force. Although pilots claimed over one hundred killed by helicopter, ARVN troops found only twenty-seven bodies. The South Vietnamese troops, none too anxious to engage such a large enemy force, suffered only one soldier wounded before losing contact with the enemy.<sup>9</sup>

ARVN forces did discover the only significant supply cache of the day. C Company, 3d Battalion, found a bunker containing a large amount of medical supplies.

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<sup>8</sup>1-9th Air Cavalry History in Donn A. Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1978), 40.

<sup>9</sup>G-2 Report, Operations Summary, Elvy B. Roberts Papers.

These items weighed almost three tons and originated from the US and Western European sources. Also included in the discovery was high-quality, modern, surgical equipment. Packaging showed this equipment to be imported from Eastern Europe via Phnom Penh.<sup>10</sup> This information was added to the evidence of Sihanouk's war profiteering.

During the afternoon, US troops conducted their first air assault, also without significant contact. Two companies from 2-7 Cav secured LZ X-Ray, five kilometers south of LZ center. Cambodian civilians reported the communists had pulled out during the morning. The 1st Cavalry artillery converted X-Ray and Center into fire support bases by the next afternoon in order to provide extended fire support to Task Force Shoemaker.<sup>11</sup>

The allied armored forces, advancing methodically from the south, encountered light resistance as they moved toward the landing zones. Task Force Bravo showed minimal progress and was temporarily withdrawn from combat due to "excessive tank breakdowns due to inadequate maintenance."<sup>12</sup> This was part of a series of events for 2-34 Armor which culminated with the relief of their battalion commander on 11 May.<sup>13</sup> Other elements lost vehicles to the terrain, further slowing the advance. General Davison showed concern for the tempo of operations: "During the first couple of days, the (11th

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Keith W. Nolan, *Into Cambodia* (New York: Dell Publishers, 1990), 126.

<sup>12</sup>Starry, 173.

<sup>13</sup>Nolan, 112.

ACR) was moving almost at the rate of dismounted infantry instead of effectively using its mobility, firepower and shock action to break right through to their objective. They were so conditioned to the almost inch by inch operation out in the jungle . . . that it took them a couple of days before I could get the message through to them.”<sup>14</sup>

By early evening, however, 2/11 ACR, stumbled upon an NVA regimental base camp. Here, they made contact with the reserve battalion of the 165th NVA Regiment dug into a hastily prepared trench line. This contact was the heaviest of the day and contained the first US fatalities of the operation.<sup>15</sup> Two troopers died when RPGs impacted their armored vehicle. With darkness approaching, Lieutenant Colonel Brookshire, the squadron commander, decided against exploring the camp that evening. The 2/11 ACR formed tight defensive perimeters, known as laagers, for the night. By morning, the enemy had completely evacuated, leaving behind a camp littered with hammocks, laundry, weapons, and ammunition. The squadron reported fifty-two NVA killed in the engagement.<sup>16</sup>

Judging from the sporadic and uncoordinated Communist response to the invasion, the Allies had achieved local surprise. The absence of heavy machine-gun fire particularly confounded helicopter pilots. Intelligence reports had indicated at least three NVA antiaircraft battalions in the area. Yet, no aircraft were lost to this point as a result of enemy antiaircraft fire. Captured documents revealed that several of the enemy units

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<sup>14</sup>Interview with Lieutenant General Michael S. Davison, Senior Officers Debriefing Program, Michael S., Davison Papers, Carlisle, PA.

<sup>15</sup>“Operation Toan Thang,” First Cavalry Operations Summary, Elvy B. Roberts Papers.

<sup>16</sup>Nolan, 136.

encountered consisted of supply and medical personnel. Prisoners included a wide variety of support units including Khmer Rouge troops who were members of the previously unknown NVA and VC Rear Service Organization.<sup>17</sup>

The discovery of these units indicated that NVA commanders had not performed a coordinated evacuation of troops prior to the assault. Defenses found on D-day did not appear to be recently repaired or improved. The NVA did not attempt to counterattack any of the initial thrusts and only engaged US forces in an effort to break contact. The 1st Cav operations summary stated: "The enemy reaction to the opening of the Allied Offensive took the form of a confused, milling crowd. . . . Tactical surprise was complete."<sup>18</sup>

The commencement of Phase III operations, search and destroy operations, on 2 May marked an exploitation of the ground success encountered on the first day.<sup>19</sup> The B-52 strikes and harassing artillery fire struck at suspected enemy locations deeper in the Fishhook. Airmobile units conducted patrols further from their established positions, attempting to prevent Communist exfiltration from the objective area. Starry's 11th ACR, spurred on by Davison, pushed north, linking up with elements of the 9th ARVN Airborne Battalion by midday. Task Force Alpha reached Highway 7 by the afternoon, closing a major gap in the envelopment. Battalion command posts moved to fire support bases within Cambodia. General Davison reinforced Task Force Shoemaker with 5-60th

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<sup>17</sup>G-2 Report, Operations Summary, Elvy B. Roberts Papers.

<sup>18</sup>"Operation Toan Thang," First Cavalry Operations Summary, Elvy B. Roberts Papers.

<sup>19</sup>"First Cavalry Operations Summary Briefing Script," Elvy B. Roberts B. Roberts Papers.

Infantry Battalion out of the 3d Bde, 9th Infantry Division, to assist in search and destroy operations.

Communist forces slowly began to rebound from the initial shock of the invasion. Throughout the day, the NVA attempted to avoid contact and to determine the disposition of Allied forces. Sniper and small unit attacks by fire increased. Using the gaps that remained in the Allied box, the NVA attempted a mass exodus of troops and material. The B/1-9 Air Cav discovered another truck convoy retreating from the Fishhook. This time, the Communists reacted with heavy small arms fire. Fighter-bombers and helicopter gunships attacked the convoy, claiming three trucks destroyed, one mounting a heavy machine gun.<sup>20</sup> COSVN, apparently maintaining some level of command and control, sought to disrupt the assault by increasing attacks on III Corps units in South Vietnam. However, these attacks, primarily mortar strikes, had little effect.

Ground units continued to turn up small- and medium-sized caches throughout the day, although none classified as a major NVA logistics base. Items discovered included 65 tons of rice and 1,100 gas masks. Headquarters company of 2-47th Mech stumbled on a particularly gruesome find. While investigating the results of ARCLIGHT, soldiers discovered the partial remains of fifty NVA along with thirty 82-millimeter mortar tubes and a large amount of ammunition.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>“Daily Event Summary,” First Cavalry Presidential Unit Citation, Elvy B. Roberts Papers.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

As in the MENU missions, high-altitude bombing did not always perform this accurately or effectively. The huge numbers of bombs usually were an ineffective substitute for a direct confrontation on the ground. According to Specialist Daniel Richner, driver for the 2d Brigade commander: "Craters were everywhere, They didn't appear to do much damage to the enemy, though."<sup>22</sup> General Davison concurred, calling Arclight

not effective at all. They missed the caches and base areas as far as I could tell. Flying in that first day . . . I could see the B-52 bomb craters. The bombing which had occurred had been going on for sometime unbeknownst to me and to a lot of other people. It seemed to be right down in the very hook of the Fishhook, very close to the Vietnamese border. Whereas the caches were on the order of three to five clicks or so back.<sup>23</sup>

On the evening of the second, a "Pink Team" (a small observation helicopter supported by a Cobra gunship) from 1-9th Air Cav found the second largest cache of the entire war. When queried by interpreters, local Cambodian civilians indicated the presence of large base near Highway 7. On their lead, Warrant Officer James Cyrus made the sighting: "We didn't see anything at first. Then I spotted one hooch, well camouflaged. Unless you were at tree top level, it would be invisible."<sup>24</sup>

The next day, Brigadier General Shoemaker dispatched "blue teams" from 1-5 Cav to investigate. Charlie Company was the first on the ground and discovered a base

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<sup>22</sup>Interview with Daniel Richner, Specialist Fourth Class, First cavalry Division, Waymart, PA, 31 December 1985.

<sup>23</sup>Interview with Lieutenant General Michael S. Davison, Senior Officers Debriefing Program, Michael S. Davison Papers, Carlisle, PA

<sup>24</sup>Interview quoted in Edward Doyle and Samuel Lipsman, *Fighting for Time: The Vietnam Experience* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1981), 166.

camp almost three square kilometers in size. Full personnel evacuation was almost complete, but several troops remained as a rear guard. Two more companies quickly reinforced the small US contingent as the enemy broke contact. Lieutenant Colonel James Anderson, the battalion commander recalls the incident:

That first night, we set up ambushes. There was all kinds of movement--men just trying to get out of the area. I remember one case when an ambush on a trail caught five NVA, killing three. . . . Two ran into another ambush a little further up the trail and a fourth one was killed. A little further on, the last guy ran into another ambush and just said the hell with it and surrendered.<sup>25</sup>

Over the next few days, additional US troops moved into the now unoccupied base camp. Meticulous investigation revealed an incredible complex filled with huge stocks of weapons, food, and assorted material. Searches eventually revealed 182 storage bunkers, eight mess halls, a training area, and a small animal farm. The 1st Cavalry troops, stunned by the size of the base, dubbed it "the City."<sup>26</sup>

The City appeared "well-organized, maintained, and capable of rapid receipt and issue of large quantities of supplies."<sup>27</sup> Documents indicated the base to be no more than two and one-half years old, built in time to support the 1968 Tet Offensive. The City served as the main supply depot for the entire 7th NVA Division. Intelligence officers compiled detailed lists of material captured in the City. Items included:

- 1,282 individual weapons
- 202 crew-served weapons (primarily mortars and machine guns)
- 319,000 rounds of .51-caliber ammunition
- 25,200 rounds of 14.5-mm anti-aircraft ammunition

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<sup>25</sup>Interview quoted in Doyle and Lipsman, 167.

<sup>26</sup>"Daily Event Summary," First Cavalry Presidential Unit Citation, Elvy B. Roberts Papers

<sup>27</sup>G-2 Report, NVA Logistical System, Annex A, Elvy B. Roberts Papers.

1,555,900 rounds of AK-47 ammunition  
2,110 hand grenades  
58,000 lbs. of plastic explosives  
22 cases of anti-personnel mines  
30 tons of rice  
8 tons of corn  
1,100 lbs. of salt  
500 bicycles 550,000 "unknown" glass ampoules  
10 pigs (live)  
25 chickens  
50 baby chicks<sup>28</sup>

The 1-9th Air Cav continued to search for additional caches and harass NVA forces attempting to flee the area. With the assistance of tactical air support, the Air Cav destroyed two motor pools containing numerous trucks, jeeps, trailers, and spare parts. Small truck convoys were destroyed on four separate occasions. As the day wore on, enemy activity levels diminished.<sup>29</sup>

On the fourth of May, II Field Force ordered a major realignment of boundaries within III Corps Tactical Zone. Lieutenant General Davison gave the 25th ID additional responsibility within III CTZ. This allowed 1st Cav to use assets still in Vietnam for an expansion of Rockcrusher. Additional elements of 1st Brigade, 1st Cav, and 1/11 ACR became subordinate to Task Force Shoemaker as the realignment took effect.<sup>30</sup>

Late in the day, the 11th ACR received orders to attack north forty kilometers and seize the town of Snoul. Snoul straddled the tactically important road junction of Routes 7, 13, and 131. A week prior to the incursions, Snoul had fallen from Cambodian

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<sup>28</sup>"Partial List of Uncovered Items" from G-2 Report, Elvy B. Roberts Papers

<sup>29</sup>"Daily Event Summary," First Cavalry Presidential Unit Citation, Elvy B. Roberts Papers

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.



government control to the 141st Regiment of the 7th NVA division. Colonel Starry broke his armored vehicles out of the jungle and moved quickly up Highway 7 until halted by a series of demolished bridges on the Khet Krachet River. Starry maneuvered the risk of continuing and halted the regiment for the night, now strung out over thirty kilometers. Through improvisational use of armored bridge layers, the regiment crossed the river by midday on the fifth.<sup>31</sup>

The 2/11 ACR reached Snoul by 1400 on the fifth, discovering entrenched NVA and taking heavy machine-gun fire. By 1700, the squadron seized a key airstrip east of the town and forced the enemy into an adjoining rubber plantation. At the airstrip, the ACR's command group received a grenade attack while taking prisoners. Colonel Starry and his S-3, then Major Frederick Franks, were wounded and evacuated. Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Bradley, deputy commander, assumed command while 3/11 ACR joined the attack. By nightfall, the regiment laagered and consolidated their positions. The battle destroyed much of Snoul, but resulted in a "crushing defeat" for the 141st NVA Regiment.<sup>32</sup>

The sixth of May marked the standdown of Task Force Shoemaker as the 1st Cav assumed control of the widening operation. This action formally launched Phase IV, expansion of operations outside the Fishhook. The 1st Cav command group and staff prepared for an impending change in leadership. Major General Roberts, held in position

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<sup>31</sup>Nolan, 170-172.

<sup>32</sup>Starry, 174-175.

by Davison for the initial assault, began transitioning command of the unit with his Assistant Division Commander for Support Major General George Casey.<sup>33</sup> Casey formally assumed command of the division on the tenth of May. The close relationship between Casey and Davison combined with a generally strong staff eased the difficulties of transition. Operations in the field were not significantly disrupted by the change in leadership.

To the south, General Tri's ARVN forces continued operations into Cambodia from the Parrot's Beak. After initial resistance, NVA and VC units broke contact to areas deeper into Cambodia. The South Vietnamese, like US troops in the Fishhook, settled into search and destroy operations. Finally in the "safe" Communist sanctuaries ARVN troops plundered the base areas. Men of the 10th ARVN Armored Cavalry Regiment sported NVA pith helmets lifted from a large medical cache. At the Chup rubber plantation, Tri's troops looted additional caches, loading their trucks and tanks with chickens, motorbikes, and bicycles.<sup>34</sup>

Bloodshed and mistreatment of civilians in the area were discovered as the battlefield expanded. At Prasaut, a small Cambodian village, ARVN troops discovered an open grave of ninety ethnic Vietnamese. These civilians had died at the hands of Cambodian government troops during the April massacres. Now allies of the Cambodians, an angry ARVN trooper scrawled, "Now is the time for the killers to pay in

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<sup>33</sup>Nolan, 97.

<sup>34</sup>Lipsman and Doyle, 174.

blood” on a destroyed building.<sup>35</sup> The Prasaut massacre was only one of numerous similar incidents, pitting the anticommunists against each other in this complex and deeply rooted conflict.

From 5 to 9 May, allied forces commenced additional incursions in and outside III CTZ. On the fifth of May, far to the north in II CTZ, the 4th Infantry Division embarked on Operation Tame the West (*Binu Tay* in Vietnamese). This multibrigade air assault west of Pleiku immediately ran afoul when several of the initial landing zones were targeted by heavy NVA fire. The division aborted the insertions for a day to allow for additional air and artillery preparation. The assaults finally went in and led to the discovery of an NVA reception and training camp.<sup>36</sup>

The NVA continued to disrupt helicopter operations with machine-gun fire along aerial lines of communication. Several helicopters were shot down including one containing Major General John Dillard, the senior engineer of US Army, Vietnam. Considered by many to be the least successful of the incursions, one historian noted the operation for its “lack of divisional aggressiveness.”<sup>37</sup> In any case, problems in the operation revealed a serious contradiction in commander’s guidance. Given the winding down of US participation in the war, pressure to minimize casualties conflicted with the aggressive maneuver of the incursions. By the sixteenth of May, the 4th Division determined the operation complete and turned Tame the West over to ARVN forces.

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Nolan, 232-36.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 223

ARVN forces, supported by US and South Vietnamese Navy vessels, embarked on incursions in the Mekong River delta on 9 May. "Operation Cuu Long" involved clearance operations along the Mekong River, destruction of NVA base areas and evacuation of ethnic Vietnamese to South Vietnam. US naval forces and advisors adhered to the twenty-five mile limit of advance and no American conventional ground forces participated in the operation.<sup>38</sup> Allied ground operations were now occurring along the entire Cambodian border.

On the sixth, II Field Force and ARVN III Corps headquarters ordered three more attacks into Cambodia. Operation Bold Lancer (Toan Thang 44), launched approximately fifteen kilometers south of the Fishhook, involved a reinforced brigade of the 25th Infantry Division. Bold Lancer targeted Base Area 354. Major General Edward Bautz Jr., commander of the 25th ID, received notification of the mission from Lieutenant General Davison on 3 May. With his tank battalion, cavalry squadron, and one of his mechanized infantry battalions on loan to the 1st Cavalry, Bautz envisioned a limited operation.

Using tactics similar to Task Force Shoemaker, an infantry battalion air assaulted into the base area after the heavy air strikes. Two mechanized battalions drove into Cambodia to link up and begin search and destroy operations. The Rach Cai Bac River posed a significant obstacle to the mechanized battalions linking up with the air assault. The offensive stalled for half a day while engineers struggled to erect a pontoon bridge

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<sup>38</sup>Tho, 85-87.

over the river. Over the next week, elements involved in Bold Lancer encountered little opposition but uncovered two large weapons caches.

Several intelligence reports indicated COSVN, previously in the Fishhook, had moved to this new location. Major General Bautz seized the opportunity to expand Bold Lancer into a raid on COSVN. On 9 May, additional elements of the 25th Division attempted to seize the new COSVN location. Concerned about casualties, Davison and Bautz again decided on supporting the attacks with Arclight preparation. The 3/4 Cav, now back under 25th Division control, moved in to the area with two air assault infantry battalions in another link up operation.

The infantry confirmed they had, in fact, found COSVN. Most of the headquarters had been evacuated the day prior, but could not complete the move before the Arclight strike. At the site, actually a mock Cambodian village, US troops found documents, typewriters and the official letterhead stamp of COSVN. Bautz's men also captured thirty-five prisoners, primarily postal and finance personnel in various states of shock from the air strikes.<sup>39</sup> When questioned, most spoke freely, claiming the COSVN leadership and operational section departed only hours prior to their capture.<sup>40</sup>

This narrow escape allowed one of the strategic objectives of the Cambodian operations to slip away. General Davison describes the failure to eliminate COSVN: "At 3 o'clock in the afternoon of the day before we went in, they got the word that the B-52's

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<sup>39</sup>Nolan

<sup>40</sup>Interview with Lieutenant General Michael S. Davison, Senior Officers Debriefing Program, Michael S. Davison Papers, Carlisle, PA

were coming that night and there was real, you know, grab your hat, call the dog, piss on the fire to get out of there. . . . COSVN, incidentally moved outside the 25 mile zone.”<sup>41</sup>

Bold Lancer and the “COSVN sweep” ended on 14 May as the US units involved moved to the Fishhook to exploit larger cache discoveries there.

Additional cache searches by 1st Cavalry and 9th ARVN Infantry Regiment (Toan Thang 45 and 46) expanded operations some 40 kilometers along the northern flank of the Fishhook. Toan Thang 46 was a straight push north by the two battalions of the ARVN regiment against NVA Base Area 350. This operation was heavily supported by US helicopters, artillery, and tactical air support. Unlike Toan Thang 44, resistance here was heavy and coordinated. After a vicious firefight on 21 May, South Vietnamese troops uncovered an enemy hospital complex capable of treating 500 men. Sporadic activity continued throughout the month in the area. As the operation wore on, NVA activity dropped off and ARVN forces spent their time searching for further caches until US support withdrew on 30 June.<sup>42</sup>

Toan Thang 45, the third attack launched on the 6th, involved elements of the 1st Cav Division's 2d Brigade against Base Area 351. Lieutenant Colonel Francis Ianni's 2-12th Cavalry air assaulted into Landing Zone Myron, named after their recently killed S-3, Myron Didyuryk. As LZ Myron evolved into a fire support base, 2-12 Cav began fanning out in search of enemy contact.<sup>43</sup> On 8 May Captain Jim Johnson's D Company

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Tho, 81-82.

<sup>43</sup>Nolan, 409-410.

responded to a Pink Team sighting of three trucks and forty NVA. Moving to this new cache location, Company D made contact with a large enemy force. An intense firefight developed as the NVA attempted to surround and destroy Johnson's unit. Mortar, artillery, and tactical air support fell within eighty meters of D Company as Ianni sent the reconnaissance platoon to reinforce Johnson.

Captain Johnson managed to rally his men after being pinned down by NVA fire for several hours. Charging the enemy positions, the troopers surprised the NVA who died at their bunkers or scattered. Contact lasted through the night as a USAF "Spooky" gunship kept the NVA from counterattacking. The battle resulted in seven dead and twenty-two wounded US troops.<sup>44</sup>

An air strike supporting Johnson's troops set off a large secondary explosion. As 2-12 Cav investigated, they uncovered a base that made Task Force Shoemaker's City "look like a suburb."<sup>45</sup> Delta Company had discovered the largest cache of the war. So much material was uncovered that engineers built a road to evacuate the contents to Highway 14 in South Vietnam. Because of the gigantic amounts of ammunition unearthed, the base entered GI vocabulary as "Rock Island East" after the US Army's Rock Island Arsenal in Illinois.<sup>46</sup> Investigation revealed a hoard of items including over seven million rounds of small arms ammunition, thousands of rockets, several General

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<sup>44</sup>Lipsman and Doyle, 167.

<sup>45</sup>Keith Nolan provides a detailed unit level description of the discovery of Rock Island East in Nolan, 399-430.

<sup>46</sup>Lipsman and Doyle, 167.

Motors trucks, and even a Porsche sports car. "I thought that the North Vietnamese were hurting until I saw all these supplies," said one amazed US soldier.<sup>47</sup>

Another major contact occurred on 14 May at FSB Brown, just south of FSB Myron. The 5-12th Infantry Battalion, OPCON to 2d Brigade from the 199th Light Infantry Brigade, relieved 5-7 Cavalry at BROWN. That evening, the 5-12th repelled a battalion-sized assault in heavy fighting.<sup>48</sup> A platoon of 105-millimeter howitzers from D Battery, 2-40 Field Artillery Battalion broke off several attacks, firing "beehive" flechette rounds directly at the NVA. Colonel Robert W. Shelton, CO of the 199th Brigade, visited his "on loan" battalion the following day, reporting:

The casualties were probably more one-sided than usual in a normally well-planned and executed attack by NVA regulars. Heavy blood trails could be seen from the berm back into the jungle, indicating numerous wounded in addition to the fifty dead. Without detracting from the valor or professional expertise of our troops, who were in an unfamiliar place in the dark of night, I would assume that the NVA saw the 1st Cavalry Division withdrawal from LZ Brown and, believing the LZ to be abandoned, thought they could walk in. Surprised at discovering American troops in the berm, they were forced to hastily improvise an attack--an undertaking not well suited to the well-disciplined, dedicated and, tough junior NVA commanders who, nevertheless, lacked initiative and independent decision-making capability.<sup>49</sup>

The 3d Battalion, 174th NVA Regiment, was not heard from for the rest of the operation.

The II Field Force again realigned tactical areas of responsibility from 13-15 May. In anticipation of this shift, 2-34 AR and 2-47 Mech Infantry reverted back to 25th ID control on the tenth of May. The 25th Division filled the void in the western portion

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>"First Cavalry Operations Summary Briefing Script," Elvy B. Roberts B. Roberts Papers.

<sup>49</sup>Shelton quoted in Nolan, 476.



of the Fishhook as 3d Brigade, joined the rest of the 1st Cav Division in the northeast. 9th ARVN Airborne assumed control of the southern Fishhook along with its responsibilities in Toan Thang 46. The 1st Cav's 1st Brigade and the 11th ACR initially remained in the northern Fishhook near Snoul.

Final realignments on the nineteenth and twentieth of May totally removed 1st Cav from the Fishhook to support Toan Thang 45. The 11th ACR, still OPCON to 1st Cav Division maintained its area of operations. With most of II Field Force units in Cambodia, much of the defense of population centers within South Vietnam was left to the Vietnamese Territorial and Civilian Irregular Defense Forces. No major incidents occurred within South Vietnam during this period, owing as much to the disruption caused by the incursions than to the efforts of these forces.<sup>50</sup>

With all participating Allied units committed, Rockcrusher and US support of other Toan Thang operations became a race against time. The latter half of May and first week in June saw some minor fire support base changes and a few unsuccessful enemy attacks. US and ARVN forces continued their relentless search for enemy caches and base areas. Each cache had to be carefully checked. Most were booby trapped with mines, grenades and explosives. "One grunt stepped on a tripwire attached to a grenade in a can of flame-thrower fuel thickener. This booby trap was set to detonate a stack of mortar ammunition, but there was no explosion. The tripwire string had rotted and broken off two inches above the grenade."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>"First Cavalry Operations Summary Briefing Script," Elvy B. Roberts B. Roberts Papers.

<sup>51</sup>Nolan, 447.

Once troops secured a cache site, the mundane job of counting and sorting began. Engineers cut landing zones or "mine shafts" in the canopy to evacuate captured weapons, medical supplies, and rice to the rear. Most munitions were blown in place. Rome Plows and heavy engineer equipment continued to cut and improve roads to the largest base areas to support ground evacuation efforts. Rice, the most commonly captured item, became a major strain on soldiers and logistical systems. Troops manhandled huge bags of rice from storage bunkers to landing zones. Helicopters then evacuated it to forward airfields. The C-130 aircraft airlifted the rice to distribution points in South Vietnam. Most was used to feed Vietnamese civilians and refugees from the incursion. Moldy, inedible, or unmilled rice was destroyed in place.<sup>52</sup>

In late May, 1st Cav troops from 5-7 Cav made contact with concentrated NVA forces on Hill 428, ten kilometers northwest of FSB Brown. After four hours of fighting in a heavy monsoon, the NVA again broke contact and left the troopers in control of the hill. Finding a large number of bunkers, 5-7 Cav discovered the last major NVA base of the Toan Thang operations. Soldiers named the cache "Shakey's Hill." Stuttering Private 1st Class Chris "Shakey" Keffalos was the only US fatality in the assault of the complex. The cache inventory marked Shakey's Hill as the third largest of the war and included 63 flamethrowers, 180 crew-served weapons, and 1.2 million rounds of ammunition.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>"First Cavalry Operations Summary Briefing Script," Elvy B. Roberts B. Roberts Papers.

<sup>53</sup>"Daily Event Summary," First Cavalry Presidential Unit Citation, Elvy B. Roberts Papers.

Cache hunting and evacuation of the base areas became the daily routine for most allied troops for the last three weeks of the operation. The withdrawal date of 30 June made complete searches and evacuation of material all but impossible. In the 1st Cav Division's AO alone, US forces turned up over 335 separate caches. Time, the weather, and an injunction requiring the removal of all damaged American vehicles and equipment to South Vietnam created an enormous logistical burden.<sup>54</sup> As the monsoon rains increased through June, the advantage of armored forces decreased sharply. Tank and mechanized units became confined to roads and high ground as truck convoys mired in the Rome Plow trails leading from the base areas.

In response, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units showed greater tactical boldness. Booby traps emplaced by US forces killed an increasing number of one and two man NVA reconnaissance teams.<sup>55</sup> Small unit attacks, mortar strikes, and ambushes became regular occurrences for Allied troops. Isolated ARVN forces bore the brunt of these attacks. American armored forces, limited by the rain, also noted a sharp increase in mining incidents.<sup>56</sup> The 11th ACR's "Lessons Learned" report reflected a growing concern for the deteriorating tactical situation:

The rapid deterioration of the connecting road between Katum and Route 7 required continuous engineer effort and extreme caution by the convoys in order to keep the single route open. There were many locations ideally suited for ambushes. . . . Such conditions required constant and effective security measures.

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<sup>54</sup>"First Cavalry Operations Summary Briefing Script," Elvy B. Roberts B. Roberts Papers.

<sup>55</sup>"Daily Event Summary," First Cavalry Presidential Unit Citation, Elvy B. Roberts Papers

<sup>56</sup>Starry, 175-176.

Enemy activity was on the upswing and night defensive positions had been attacked by fire almost nightly for the past two weeks.<sup>57</sup>

On 15 June at 0230, the NVA struck at FSB David, northeast of Shakey's Hill.

The base served as the location of the forward command post for the 1st Brigade, 1st Cav Division. Small arms, B-40 rockets, RPGs, and 82-millimeter mortars preceded a large ground assault. Bad weather and ground fog hampered the use of US air support. Elements of 1-5th Cavalry, assigned to secure the FSB, defeated the attack with their organic weapons and artillery. The assault ceased at 0445 with sporadic small arms continuing until 0900. Although twenty-eight NVA were killed, twenty-nine US troops received wounds during the assault.<sup>58</sup>

As the attacker's initiative dissipated, Allied troops became restless. The initial elation of the assaults gave way to boredom and tension. A 1st Cav Division trooper complained: "There are too many gooks in Cambodia. I just didn't feel right there; it gave me a kind of spooky feeling, especially since we found all that stuff in the caches. They'll be coming back and they'll be coming in mad."<sup>59</sup> A sergeant quipped how his troops, formerly complaining for a chance to get into Cambodia, could not wait to return to Vietnam.

Troop safety, morale and discipline became the primary leadership focus as June 30th approached. A large black market developed around the cache system which

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<sup>57</sup>"11th Armored Cavalry Regiment Lessons Learned," Operation Toan Thang 44, Donn A. Starry Papers, Carlisle, PA.

<sup>58</sup>"Daily Event Summary," First Cavalry Presidential Unit Citation, Elvy B. Roberts Papers

<sup>59</sup>Lipsman and Doyle, 168.

officers largely ignored, viewing it as a morale boost. Problems of drugs, disobedience, and racial tension and of rife in rear echelon units were less disruptive in the forward areas. Because US troops spent most of their time at remote locations, interactions with Cambodians were limited. Still, incidences of poor discipline and mistreatment occurred.

General Davison remarked:

We had one or two cases of rape or that sort of thing, but we had very little contact with the villagers because by and large we were out in the jungle. I believe there were only two or three occasions which caused me to direct an investigation. One involved a helicopter firing at domestic animals.<sup>60</sup>

The domestic animal incident involved the 1-9th Air Cavalry Regiment, still conducting reconnaissance and security missions along the limit of advance. Helicopter pilots, frustrated by the sharp decrease in NVA contact, looked for any opportunity to engage the enemy. According to the unit after-action report, sixty water buffalo "bearing pack-strap marks indicating use by the enemy" were sighted by Cobra gunships. Machine-gun, rocket and 20-millimeter cannon fire "engaged" these hapless animals, resulting in thirty-two buffalo "killed by helicopter."<sup>61</sup>

Beginning on 20 June, US units began a phased withdrawal to Vietnam. ARVN forces, not bound by the 30 June deadline, continued combat operations on a reduced scale. Command posts and fire support bases relocated to pre-invasion positions while columns of armored vehicles, caked in mud, followed roads back to the border. Rome plows continued to cut swaths through the jungle, bulldozing some 1,700 acres and 1,100

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<sup>60</sup>Davison Interview.

<sup>61</sup>"1-9 After Action Report" in 1st Cavalry Division Operations Report, Elvy Roberts Papers, Carlisle PA.

bunker complexes.<sup>62</sup> In order to prevent Communist counterattacks and land one final blow at the base areas, US forces hit the sanctuaries with artillery and air strikes rivaling those of 1 May. AT 4:00 P.M., 29 June 1970, 3d Squadron, 11th ACR, the last US ground forces, reentered South Vietnam.<sup>63</sup> The 1-9 Air Cav followed close behind. In the spirit of Vietnamization, the US involvement in operation "Total Victory," ended in withdrawal.

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<sup>62</sup>Starry, 176.

<sup>63</sup>Nolan, 529-531. Keith Nolan describes the last minute jockeying of units for the honor of being "last out of Cambodia." 3-4 Cavalry, still OPCON to 11 ACR had been rear guard until unceremoniously switched at the last minute, replaced by L Troop, 3/11 ACR. Nevertheless, 3d Platoon, B/3-4 Cavalry, attached to L/3/11 served as the L Troop commander's rear security element, thus technically earning the "last out" title.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUCSESSES AND FAILURES

As of today I can report that all of our major military objectives have been achieved. . . we have captured and destroyed far more in war material than we anticipated; and American and Allied casualties have been far lower than expected. . . . Confidence and morale in the South Vietnamese Army has been greatly bolstered. This operation clearly demonstrated that our Vietnamization program is succeeding.<sup>1</sup>

President Richard M. Nixon

Although weakened by the Allied operation in Cambodia, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong are regrouping and resupplying themselves, man by man, piece by piece.<sup>2</sup>

Lieutenant General William McCaffrey

As a guy who had to live or die by how well the enemy was equipped or fought, there was no doubt in my mind that the correlation was very great between us going into Cambodia and then not taking any more heat from the enemy.<sup>3</sup>

Captain Joseph B. Anderson, Jr.

The lack of major ground engagements during the incursions gives a misleading impression of a relatively bloodless campaign. Despite allied inability to trap major elements of the 7th or 9th NVA Divisions, Allied force killed 11,349 and captured 2,328 enemy troops by official totals.<sup>4</sup> However, considerable debate remains as to actual

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<sup>1</sup>Richard M. Nixon. "Address to the Nation on the Cambodian Sanctuary Operation," June 6, 1970 [Online] Available <http://www.nixonlinks>, September 15, 1998.

<sup>2</sup>Edward Doyle and Samuel Lipsman: *The Vietnam Experience* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1983), 184.

<sup>3</sup>Keith W. Nolan, *Into Cambodia* (New York: Dell Publishers, 1990), 536.

<sup>4</sup>G-2 Report, II Field Force Headquarters, Michael S. Davison Papers, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

enemy losses. CIA estimates call II Field Force figures "highly suspect. . . Many of the alleged casualties were the result of air and artillery strikes, (making) a precise body count so difficult (and resulting) in civilian and non-combatants . . . being included in the loss figure."<sup>5</sup> Many of the captured were Khmer and Vietnamese detainees, held temporarily as laborers for the NVA.

American casualty figures, 284 killed in action, 2,339 wounded and 13 missing,<sup>6</sup> marked an increase over the months preceding the operation. ARVN casualties, 800 killed and 3,410 wounded, reflect the greater length and depth of their participation. Most occurred during the initial weeks of the incursions until NVA main force units had either evacuated or been destroyed.

Ironically, Major General Casey, the 1st Cav Commander, died in a helicopter crash a week after the end of Rockcrusher. Casey was on his way to deliver personal congratulations to his most seriously wounded soldiers awaiting evacuation. Despite warnings from his staff, he embarked on a flight to Cam Rahn Bay taking him over the central highlands during a heavy monsoon storm.<sup>7</sup> His loss along with his aide and sergeant major was felt throughout the division and symbolized the last casualties of the operation.

In a letter to his troops, Casey describes his impressions of Rockcrusher:

The results of this operation far exceeded expectations, it has been the most successful operation in the history of the 1st Cavalry Division. . . . You

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<sup>5</sup>CIA report quoted in Doyle and Lipsman, 178.

<sup>6</sup>Nolan, 533-34.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 533.



killed enough of the enemy to man three NVA regiments; captured or destroyed enough individual and crew served weapons to equip two NVA divisions; and denied the enemy an entire year's supply of rice for all his maneuver battalions in our AO. You captured more rocket, mortar and recoilless rifle rounds than the enemy fired in all of III Corps during the twelve months preceding our move into Cambodia.<sup>8</sup>

As Casey indicates, the official tally of results in Operation Rockcrusher and the associated incursions gave its authors some justification for the costs. COSVN's ordered evacuation, while somewhat successful in terms of personnel, failed to save much of their cached supplies. The II Field Force G-2 estimated only 400-600 tons of equipment escaped Allied capture.<sup>9</sup> This contrasts to a staggering list of materials destroyed or seized by the Allies:

- 22,892 individual weapons
- 2,509 crew-served weapons
- 15,000,000 rounds of small-arms ammunition
- 99,552 antiaircraft rounds
- 143,00 rockets, mortar, and recoilless rifle rounds
- 62,022 grenades
- 5,482 mines
- 1,002 satchel charges
- 83,000 pounds of explosives
- 55 tons of medical supplies
- 7,000 tons of rice
- 11,700 bunkers
- 435 trucks, jeeps, and motorcycles<sup>10</sup>

Lieutenant General Davison describes the functional effect of capturing this much enemy equipment as approximately enough material to keep three NVA divisions

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<sup>8</sup>Casey letter quoted in Nolan, 532-533.

<sup>9</sup>II FF G-2 Estimate quoted in Nolan, 534.

<sup>10</sup>US President, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Richard M. Nixon, 1970 (Washington, DC: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1953-), 456.

supplied for eighteen months. As the summer monsoons set in, the roads, trail networks, and base areas became swamps. Communist efforts to repair and restock them bogged down in seas of mud, further postponing plans to resume offensive operations against South Vietnam. Henry Kissinger's staff predicted the effect of the losses to cause at least a six to nine month lull in Communist activity.<sup>11</sup>

The assaults also disrupted the NVA attacks within Cambodia against Lon Nol. Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Thanh, the highest-ranking NVA officer captured during the operation, disclosed that the operations upset plans to occupy Kompong Cham and Svay Rieng provinces by May 1st. From these locations, the NVA would capture Phnom Penh, leaving all Cambodia as a staging area for a concerted attack on Saigon.<sup>12</sup> Instead, the communists shifted to limited attacks in southeastern Cambodia. The NVA cultivated an anti-Lon Nol front with the Khmer Rouge and pro-Sihanouk forces, embroiling Lon Nol and their ARVN "allies" in a bloody stalemate.<sup>13</sup> Operations now focused on controlling eastern Laos and northern Cambodia. This allowed the communists to improve the Ho Chi Minh trail system for an offensive now projected for 1972.

As a result, the operation had a stabilizing effect on the ARVN and civilians living in III CTZ. Davison describes:

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<sup>11</sup>Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 507.

<sup>12</sup>Tran Dinh Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion* (Washington, DC: US Army Center for Military History, 1979), 173.

<sup>13</sup>Sak Sutsakhan, *The Khmer Republic at War and the Final Collapse* (Washington, DC: US Army Center for Military History, 1980), 67.

A real sort of calm settled over all of MR3 during and after the Cambodian Operation. . . . An Loc's population increased three-fold. Merchants were coming in from Saigon and moving to An Loc and setting up little stores and so forth. MR3, except for Saigon, became self-sufficient in rice . . . the VC had been weakened to the point of non-effectiveness and many of their veteran cadre came over to the government.<sup>14</sup>

Davison also recounts a growth of the timber industry, reopening of plantations and an ability to travel safely throughout MR3 as evidence of a weakened enemy. One company commander stated that you could not "pick a fight" in III CTZ after the incursions. An ARVN officer describes "one could drive his car alone along Route 1 . . . all the way from the Ben Hai River to Ca Mau without risk of sniper fire or land mines, road hazards so common in the previous years."<sup>15</sup>

The estimates on a revision of the NVA timetable proved to be accurate. No significant combat occurred in the Fishhook border region for two years after the invasions. Still, less than two years later, three communist divisions supported by tanks struck deep into South Vietnam from these same sanctuaries. In an attack orchestrated by COSVN, the 5th and 9th VC and 7th NVA divisions nearly seized the provincial capital of An Loc as part of the 1972 Easter Offensives.<sup>16</sup> Massive US air support and personal involvement by American advisors are generally credited with stemming this attack. How did such an apparently successful operation gain such a short term.

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<sup>14</sup>Interview with Lieutenant General Michael S. Davison, Senior Officers Debriefing Program, Michael S. Davison Papers, Carlisle, PA.

<sup>15</sup>Tho, 181.

<sup>16</sup>James H. Willbanks, *Thiet Giap! The Battle of An Loc, April 1972* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, US Army Command and General Staff College, 1993), 3-4.

The results of the incursions give testimony to the difficulty of linking the strategic goals and tactical objectives. This link, termed "operational art" integrates tactical battles and engagements that, when won, achieve the strategic aims. The discussion of operational art in our current edition of FM 100-5, *Operations*, explains this delicate process. Operational art uses precise measure, destruction of base area 353 for instance, to accomplish imprecise aims, Vietnamizing the war.

Operational art requires broad vision, the ability to anticipate, and an understanding of risks. FM 100-5 lists three general questions posed to the operational artist:

- 1) What military conditions will achieve the strategic objectives of the theater of war or theater of operations?
- 2) What sequence of actions is most likely to produce these conditions?
- 3) How should the commander apply military resources within established limitations to accomplish the sequence of actions?<sup>17</sup>

This process imposes a somewhat artificial level of order on a system that, by its very nature, is shifting and transitory. It requires that commanders consider the ends they must achieve, the ways to achieve those ends, and how to use the means available. Ways to achieve strategic ends are subject to restrictions imposed by strategic authority. Resources, the means available, are always limited. Strategic ends, while determined to be politically expedient, may be militarily contradictory. Ends often have a way of evolving to fit political necessity which inhibits effective military action.

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<sup>17</sup>Department of the Army, FM 100-5, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, June 1993), 6-2.

As discussed, the strategic aims of the Cambodian incursions came down to three primary concepts. First, the NCA was determined to prevent NVA disruption of the phased US withdrawal from Southeast Asia. This perceived threat compounded by the NVA offensive against Lon Nol provided the primary justification for the incursions. Second, Vietnamization, if it had any chance of succeeding, required time to develop and mature. ARVN participation in a large-scale operation could also be used as a political validation for the program. Third was President Nixon's stated aim to seize COSVN, the elevation of an operational objective to a strategic goal.

Really an operational objective, the capture of COSVN portrayed the President's fixation on delivering a crippling blow to the communist cause. Making its capture a key aspect of the operation caused consternation among the President's strategists and operational commanders. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird recalls, "Right up to the time he gave that speech, I was pleading to have that out because COSVN was never a single headquarters. . . . So again the American people were misled by not having a real understanding of what (COSVN) was about."<sup>18</sup>

In Vietnam, commanders had a similar reaction. Lieutenant General Davison states, "finding COSVN headquarters was not in my mission as given me by General Abrams. He never mentioned COSVN to me . . . that was something that somebody in the White House had *written into a press release* about COSVN headquarters; it was

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<sup>18</sup> Doyle and Lipsman, 178.

never given to me as part of my mission" (italics added).<sup>19</sup> Brigadier General Douglas Kinnard, Davison's chief of staff, was "flabbergasted" at the announcement. He viewed it as media posturing and further evidence of Washington's misunderstanding of the war and the enemy.<sup>20</sup>

Limitations imposed on the operation reflect similar operational meddling at strategic level. After aggressively announcing the incursions in a speech termed "jingoistic" by the media, President Nixon backtracked. He set a rather arbitrary limit of twenty-five miles and sixty days for the incursions to deflect congressional and public opposition to the campaign. In the process, US forces involved in the incursions had to adjust tactics and objectives to the accelerated timetable.

Complicating the situation were the existing Rules of Engagement in theater. Indirect fire restrictions on built-up areas led to exploitation by the NVA. On several occasions, mortar attacks would be delivered from the vicinity of Cambodian villages.<sup>21</sup> The coordination needed to fire into these areas gave enemy mortar crews additional time to escape counterfire. Distinguishing noncombatants from the enemy was no easier in the incursions than any other time in the war. The mixture of Cambodian peasants, Vietnamese civilians, NVA, and VC created the general rule of not firing unless fired upon. The frustration Captain John Speedy, commander, K troop, 2/11th ACR felt when

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Lieutenant General Michael S. Davison, Senior Officers Debriefing Program, Michael S. Davison Papers, Carlisle, PA

<sup>20</sup>Nolan, 101.

<sup>21</sup>Rules of Engagement Annex, 1st Cavalry Division Operations Order, Operation Toan Thang 43/44, Combined Arms Research Library, Fort Leavenworth, KS.

applying the rules of engagement is evident. "It was this rule that saved the lives of the Cambodian riders of a supply column laden with NVA rice. . . . The rice they [my soldiers] destroyed, the Cambodian's they let go."<sup>22</sup>

Beneath these formal restrictions lay the unspoken political pressure to keep US casualties at absolute minimums. The practical effect of this led General Davison to select Arclight preparation in favor of surprise attacks. At lower tactical levels, despite trappings of maneuver warfare, most engagements were attrition-based. Units made contact and brought in air, artillery, and heavy weapons before moving. Given an enemy that was intent on avoiding contact, decisive action rarely occurred. As a result, destruction of sizable enemy forces, while operationally desirable, became tactically unlikely. Thus, the means to accomplish the strategic aim of preventing NVA disruption of US withdrawal was limited to destruction of infrastructure.

This factor may describe General Davison's stated opinion on the time and space limitations.

Oh, I don't think the 25-mile limit hurt us particularly because all the supply caches actually were inside that 25-mile limit. We didn't know it at the time. We found that out as we went along and particularly after we got hold of a couple of Cambodian Army officers who had participated in moving the stuff into the area. They were a tremendous help to us in finding additional areas. So as far as the 25-mile limit was concerned and *my mission of getting the supplies out* [italics mine], it had no substantial effect. With regard to the two-month limit, if we could have gone another two weeks or perhaps another month, we probably would have gotten some more stuff out. We were pretty well over the hump in finding new caches and on the declining side of the curve, so it may have been that by the middle of the next month we would have been in a dry well situation.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 162.

These are judgments, of course, derived from our experience and from captured documents.<sup>23</sup>

Given these limitations, operational commanders put together the plans to best accomplish the strategic aims. As shown, MACV, II Field Force, and their ARVN counterparts developed the Toan Thang campaign as a series of limited attacks across a broad front. Each attack specified a communist base area previously subject to the unsuccessful Menu air campaign. By minimizing the movement of forces into II CTZ prior to the invasion, Davison sought to exploit operational surprise and minimize an evacuation of material. Allocation of additional resources from II CTZ supported exploitation of the cache finds under the sixty-day time constraint.

Strategic intelligence indicating the movement of main NVA forces deeper into Cambodia was known by II Field Force prior to D-day. As the likelihood of engaging main NVA forces diminished, destruction of infrastructure in each base area became the overarching operational objective. Each tactical command developed its concept around seizure of cache sites. Destruction of enemy forces defending or evacuating these locations became an implied task supporting the strategic goal of force destruction.

In order to demonstrate President Nixon's plan for Vietnamization, the second strategic aim, all operations were combined. US commanders gave much attention to the operations conducted by the ARVN. Vietnamization took specific operational form in the South Vietnamese led Toan Thang 41/42 incursions and ARVN participation in the other attacks. The task organization of each attack reflects combined nature of the

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<sup>23</sup>Interview with Lieutenant General Michael S. Davison, Senior Officers Debriefing Program, Michael S. Davison Papers, Carlisle, PA.



incursions. Beyond use of conventional ARVN forces, operational planners employed territorial troops for security within South Vietnam and to assist in evacuating captured material out of the sanctuaries.

President Nixon and the strategic military leadership used the results of the incursions as evidence of effective Vietnamization. Many opposed to the war were immediately suspect. An editorial in the *New York Times* stated:

[Vietnamization] does suggest that a twenty-year search for a successful war in Southeast Asia will not be easily converted into a search for the means to withdraw. The Cambodian adventure is only one more proof, for anyone who still needs it, that our current crisis in Southeast Asia is only the outward manifestation of a continuing crisis of government at home in America. . . . "Vietnamization" is in essence neither a simple escalation nor a simple de-escalation, but an effort, which in all likelihood is bound to fail, to pursue both courses simultaneously. . . . Nixon, like Johnson before him, is still putting off the brutal choice between peace and "victory."<sup>24</sup>

Despite this review, on the ground the ARVN forces generally performed well at the tactical level. The 3d ARVN Airborne Brigade of Task Force Shoemaker, conducted the initial air assaults into the Fishhook and made the first significant cache discoveries. Operational capabilities of the ARVN, however, were not effectively tested. Even General Tri's push into the Parrot's Beak, inextricably linked to US airpower, intelligence, and logistics, hardly demonstrated operational independence. Indeed, as seen in the later invasions into Laos by the South Vietnamese and the ARVN response to the 1972 Easter invasions, this area remained critically weak.

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<sup>24</sup>Peter Dale Scott, "Better Dead Cambodians than Red," an editorial from the *New York Times* in *Conflict in Indochina*, Gettleman and Kaplan, ed. (New York: Random House, 1970) 408.

The third stated strategic aim, destruction of COSVN, became a burden for both operational and tactical planners. Realizing COSVN had evacuated the Fishhook prior to April 30th, II Field Force diverted considerable effort and resources to finding and destroying the headquarters. Major General Bautz' "COSVN sweep" diverted a brigade's effort from sanctuary search and destroy operations with little to show for the effort.

That said, based on operational results, the incursions generally requirements to accomplish the first strategic aim. Communist infrastructure was seriously damaged and, as a result, the North Vietnamese timetable for invasion of the South was delayed. While this objective did not support the concept of a conventional force on force victory, it certainly provided the time and space required for withdrawal of the majority of US combat forces from South Vietnam. To term the incursions a spoiling attack as part of an operational rear guard concept would not be off the mark.

How well did the results of the tactical missions of this rear guard accomplish the operational objectives? Using Toan Thang 43-45 as the primary example, Generals Shoemaker and Roberts generally developed a concept, which supported Davison's operational objectives and intent. These objectives were destruction of the base area infrastructure and communist forces within the limit of advance, seizure of COSVN and evacuation of captured material where possible. All operations were to be combined in nature. Minimizing risk of US casualties was implicit in Davison's instructions. Through the hasty expansion of several off-the-shelf contingency plans, the 1st Cav staff planned and resourced the limited double envelopment of Task Force Shoemaker and

later expanded the incursions to include other units and exploit the destruction and evacuation of NVA facilities. Nonetheless, several deficiencies in command and control were evident.

The reactive nature of the exploitation phase of Rockcrusher begs a question. Why did tactical leaders at division level not perceive the expansion of the operation beyond the initial “three-to-five-day raid?” Much of this was probably due to strategic guidance, uncertain nature of the initial public, and congressional reaction to the invasion. At the tactical level, this often led to ad hoc changes to command relationships and mission planning. Several battalion-level units were only given several hours to plan for their portions in Rockcrusher and the follow on operations.

Compressed planning timelines had harmful effects on the ability of a given unit to synchronize operations. The 1st Cav After Action Review states that planning at II CTZ was “minimal” and that the preponderance of coordination was left to the division.<sup>25</sup> To Lieutenant General Davison’s credit, his decision to retain Major General Roberts for the opening phases of the operation kept a difficult situation from getting worse

At the lower tactical levels, command and control difficulties were similar to those evident throughout Vietnam at this stage in the war. Several echelons of leadership overlapped above the company commander on the ground. This caused a commander to quip: “I can assure you from the point of view of some infantryman sweating his ass off,

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<sup>25</sup>Memo from LTC Rehm to COL Cortner in First Cavalry Division After Action Review, Operation Rockcrusher Collection, Combined Arms Research Library, Fort Leavenworth, KS.

facing hot lead at very close quarters, it is very difficult to respect or identify with his leadership sitting up in the clouds in starched fatigues.”<sup>26</sup>

Cohesion of most units was weakened by theater policies of leader rotation and the atmosphere created by Vietnamization. Morale, effected by antiwar attitudes at home, racial tensions, and even drug use, was a major concern to tactical leaders. During the incursions, several incidents of combat refusal had to be defused by tactical leaders. One required the attention of Brigadier General Michael J. L. Greene, ADC of the 25th Division when troops initially refused to air assault as part of Bold Lancer. Another involved the failure of an infantry company to reinforce its sister unit at night during the seizure of Rock Island East.<sup>27</sup> Given the circumstances, the nature of these incidents were probably no more significant than in any other American conflict. Still, the practical effect on leaders reinforced the reliance on overwhelming firepower at initial contact.

Despite challenges to command and control, units still managed to routinely accomplish their tactical missions in difficult circumstances. At the small unit level, the ability to react quickly to an often confusing situation on the ground gave the Americans a tactical advantage over their foe. US tactical leaders often found their NVA counterparts to be predictable and unimaginative. The NVA commander, while proving to be “a careful and meticulous planner in every aspect,” behaved like “a creature of

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<sup>26</sup>Nolan, 264.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 262-63, 420.

habit.”<sup>28</sup> An example was the RPG ambushes of the 7th NVA Division in the rubber plantations around Route 7. Despite the fact that the terrain allowed for US off road maneuver, the NVA persisted in these confrontations with little variation. Kill ratios in these ambushes averaged forty NVA to one US killed verses a fifteen to one ratio in the denser jungle.<sup>29</sup> Despite these losses, the NVA maintained this tactic throughout the operation.

The relative absence of operational and tactical intelligence prior to 30 April compounded the difficulty for tactical level staffs to develop a perspective of the enemy situation. Strategic intelligence support of the operation was largely inaccurate. Salem House reconnaissance reports and bomb damage assessments failed to give tactical commanders of an accurate picture of enemy dispositions. Based on preassault intelligence reports General Davison mentioned he expected to see “concrete pillboxes.”<sup>30</sup> The five to ten kilometer difference between the templated and actual locations of the base areas had major impact on the effectiveness of preparatory air strikes and bombardments.

The extremely sensitive nature of the operations prior to the assault combined with the desire for surprise has been cited for this failure to support tactical intelligence collection efforts. The II Field Force denial of overflights and reconnaissance prior to

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<sup>28</sup>11th ACR After Action Report, Donn A. Starry Papers, US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Interview with Lieutenant General Michael S. Davison, Senior Officers Debriefing Program, Michael S. Davison Papers, Carlisle, PA.

the initial bombardments, all in the name of operations security, created an information void that helps explain the initially slow pace of ground operations. In addition, 1:50,000 scale maps of Cambodia were unavailable at lower levels until just before mission execution.

Most leaders agree, however, operational surprise had been compromised by earlier ARVN forays and the unavoidable preparations required for an operation of this scale. Logistical and fire support preparations combined with the South Vietnamese attack into the Angel's Wing on 14 April undoubtedly tipped off the NVA on likelihood of additional incursions. Adequate planning time and intelligence dissemination was sacrificed in an operational effort to achieve local surprise and prevent coordinated response by the NVA. In that regard, particularly when judged against the poorly conducted evacuation of the base areas, the Allies met some success. Had these measure been combined with a coordinated operational deception plan, surprise could have been greater.

Given these limitations of intelligence, US and ARVN units aggressively collected tactical intelligence once the operation commenced. Integration of intelligence assets combined with the inherent collection capability of air and ground units developed a fairly accurate picture of the AO. The ability to rapidly translate the large amount of captured documents and quickly use information of value resulted from task organizing translators and analysts to the lowest tactical levels. It was the effectiveness of these sources that led to the shift in 1st Cav operations to the north of the Fishhook, the near

miss on the COSVN sweep, and expansion of II CTZ operations to include the 25th Infantry Division.

In terms of maneuver, that is “the movement of forces to place the enemy in a position of disadvantage,”<sup>31</sup> the operation did not meet its expectations. This is difficult to see on the surface. Certainly, Allied forces conducted an impressive amount of movement within the AO. Regarding the 11th ACR, Colonel Starry wrote in 1971:

It has been said that the Vietnam War made standard military operational methods obsolete. . . . While this may be true to some extent . . . the Blackhorse attacked (from an attack position), crossed a line of departure, linked up with ARVN Airmobile infantry, conducted another passage of lines, seized a heavily defended objective, and exploited success by mopping up in the rear. It was noted with considerable relief that no one had forgotten the fundamentals.<sup>32</sup> Operationally, however, this quote does not necessarily describe maneuver.

Tactics based primarily on reaction to the enemy and followed up with air and artillery strikes usually gave the NVA time to escape. Such attritional warfare failed to decisively engage any enemy units above the battalion level. Even the “regimental” battle for Snoul, concerned itself with an enemy rearguard battalion. While the Allied plan had the trappings of maneuver in terms of air assaults, heavy and light force linkups and exploitation by armor and cavalry forces, the enemy and the imposed limit of advance undermined the operational plan. By the end of the first week, the Allied operational “scheme of maneuver” became a platoon and company level massive search and destroy operation.

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<sup>31</sup>FM 100-5, 2-5.

<sup>32</sup>11th ACR After Action Report, Donn A. Starry Papers.

At the tactical level, the liberal use of heavy forces and helicopter gunships did permit US forces to rapidly outmaneuver smaller enemy units. Creative and proven tactics like effective integration of Pink and Blue teams permitted US forces to exploit situations faster than the enemy. Rapid reinforcement of Allied forces in contact repeatedly swung the tactical balance against the NVA.

Still, difficulties arose in the integration of light and heavy forces. Armor and cavalry units lacked both the expertise and manpower to execute the dismounted tactics required to properly conduct detailed searches of base areas and cache sites. Likewise, air assault infantry often did not employ armor efficiently or effectively. The 11th ACR debriefing report stated:

There was almost universal lack of understanding by infantry commanders of the capabilities and techniques of employment of armored cavalry. particularly concerning an almost fatal fixation with the idea of breaking the cavalry down to the lowest level with a few vehicles for each small infantry element . . . this reflected a general lack of understanding of the synergism that accrues from the employment of cavalry as an organic whole.<sup>33</sup>

Captain John Speedy, a cavalry troop commander who served in both infantry and cavalry units stated what he saw as central to the problem:

Cavalrymen are afraid to walk around. Because like in Cambodia you had a company from the First Air Cav riding on my vehicles. They said, you guys are insane. You're riding damn near to get ambushed. I said probably, we usually do get ambushed because we can't get off the roads. But don't worry. We have firepower, we got armor. They said you're nuts, because they didn't like being mounted. To us, we didn't like being dismounted. You know, the security came in different ways.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>11th Armored Cavalry Debriefing Report, Donn A. Starry Papers.

<sup>34</sup>Interview with Lieutenant Colonel John C. Speedy III, Senior Officer Oral History Program, interviewed by Gerald Lord, 1984, Carlisle, PA.



An effective and thoroughly planned scheme of indirect fires adequately supported the needs of US commanders. Synchronization of Rockcrusher's initial fire plan was largely the work of Major Anthony Pokorny, 1st Cav Artillery operations officer.<sup>35</sup> Through efficient overlap of fire support bases and close air support coverage, Allied units rarely found themselves without immediate fire support. The capability to air lift artillery into secure landing zones and quickly convert them into firebases was exploited throughout the operation. In addition, artillery units provided counterbattery and direct fires, primarily during NVA mortar raids and assaults of fire support bases.

NVA weakness in two key battlefield operating systems allowed US forces an unusual degree of freedom of maneuver. Both the NVA air defense and engineer efforts were initially ineffective. The presence of an integrated air defense or countermobility effort could have had drastically reduced the ability of the Allies to achieve tactical dominance. Of the four antiaircraft battalions in the area, only one actively engaged US helicopters around Snoul and was quickly destroyed. Small arms air defenses showed a similar lack of zeal. When air defenses were integrated and aggressive, as in Operation Tame the West in 2d CTZ, US units showed a corresponding decrease in the effectiveness of air assaults.

Likewise, a more intensive mine warfare campaign could have created major difficulties for the Allied ground forces. The constricting terrain made mines the single most serious problem confronting by heavy units. The NVA recognized this and, after the initial shock of the operation, increasingly employed mines to disrupt Allied

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<sup>35</sup>Nolan, 99.

operations. Mines were usually planted along roads, in areas cleared by Rome plows or at random in terrain around firebases and laager sites. During the incursions, the 11th ACR alone encountered over 1,000 antitank mines, accounting for over 95 percent of the 352 vehicles lost or damaged during Rockcrusher. Attempts at detecting mines were only marginally effective, causing Colonel Starry to state that "with an intensified mine program, the NVA could have virtually immobilized the [11th ACR]."<sup>36</sup>

In addition to countermine operations, combat engineer activities of Rockcrusher involved an intensive amount of mobility and survivability support. By all accounts, the support provided by combat engineer elements was vital to US maneuver efforts. Tasks conducted by engineer assets included pontoon and AVLB bridging, airfield, and firebase construction. Land and road clearing operations, when properly secured by armor or mechanized escort, were some of the more successful aspects of the operation. Rome plows cleared literally hundreds of kilometers of road through the jungle,<sup>37</sup> making large scale cache evacuation possible. Engineers also lent expertise in demolition of bunkers and facilities, combining the effects of their work with the incoming monsoon. This caused the communists an extended delay in reopening the base areas.

The logistics effort required to sustain this operation would have been difficult in the best of circumstances. The requirements of what was essentially a light-heavy operation demanded the total focus of II Field Force logistics assets. Snarls in the flow

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<sup>36</sup>11th Armored Cavalry Debriefing Report, Donn A. Starry Papers.

<sup>37</sup>Engineer Lessons Learned, First Cavalry After Action Review, Combined Arms Research Library, Fort Leavenworth, KS.

of spare parts and supplies compounded with the poor lines of communications within Cambodia. Vehicular operational readiness, the pulse of a heavy force, became a significant concern for units by day three of the operation.

Serious problems, some systemic, some self inflicted existed throughout US forces. Examples were a weak parts resupply network and the total lack of dedicated direct ground maintenance support for 11th ACR and other heavy units. Part cannibalization from vehicles damaged in battle became commonplace shortly into the operation.<sup>38</sup> Vehicle deadlines requiring significant repair work often took the armored vehicle (and its crew) back to logistics facilities in South Vietnam.

Crews of the M551 Sheridan Armored Reconnaissance Vehicle had particular problems. The vehicle, with a relatively complex fire control system, was difficult to keep up in the best of circumstances. Combine this with weak maintenance from crews who were getting increasingly dispirited by mines and ambushes and combat readiness began to fall below 60 percent. One troop commander's solution was:

When your vehicle's broken, the drivers can stay back and work on it, but the rest of the crew, all the other three guys, you're going out and riding on the outside of the ACAV's, and every time we find anything (that) needs to dismount a checkout, you're going to do it. That's all it took. My rate went from very bad to the best in the history of the regiment.<sup>39</sup>

Aviation, maintained primarily from fixed sites within Vietnam, generally had fewer problems. Yet demands on air assets to conduct air movement and resupply remained high. Much was due to the tempo of the operation. Yet, an expectation by

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<sup>38</sup>11th Armored Cavalry Debriefing Report, Donn A. Starry Papers.

<sup>39</sup>Interview with Lieutenant Colonel John C. Speedy III, Senior Officer Oral History Program

many air assault infantry units for a “three-day logbird” created an over-reliance on logistics.<sup>40</sup> Basically, some units would plan operations around the incoming mail, food, and supplies of the incoming helicopter, scheduled for three-day intervals. This artificially limited the range and employment of infantry units according to some commanders. Armored and cavalry forces required daily resupply in this form, also restricting their maneuver.

Manning, another aspect of the combat service support, presented its own set of problems. Units reported some senior noncommissioned officers using physical profiles to get out of field duty in Cambodia. Two second lieutenants newly assigned to the 11th ACR declared religious convictions preventing them from combat duty upon arrival to regimental base camp and were assigned duties in the rear.<sup>41</sup> The relatively short duration of the campaign prevented any major problems in unit manning. Had the operation continued, however, stricter evacuation and replacement policies would have been necessary to maintain personnel readiness.

Despite these detractors, combat service support of the operation improved during later phases. Once engineer assets created the necessary roads, logistics units became intimately connected with the back haul of supplies from the NVA base areas. Anticipating increased requirements for demolitions, ammunition and fuel to support the movement out of Cambodia, logistical planners pushed and pre-positioned supplies to

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<sup>40</sup>Nolan, 403.

<sup>41</sup>11th Armored Cavalry Debriefing Report, Donn A.Starry Papers.

support units as they left the area of operations. Use of Cambodian and Vietnamese support labor intensive tasks eased some of the burden on US forces.<sup>42</sup>

The combined performance of these battlefield operating systems led to an operation that successfully bludgeoned, rather than finessed its way from 1 May to 30 June 1970. Impressive accomplishments in fire support, engineering, and, in some cases, tactical maneuver, contrast against significant problems in logistics, operations security, and intelligence. Given an ambiguous enemy situation, major political limitations, and a deep-seated aversion to risk force-on-force confrontation with the enemy, the operation became an attrition-based temporary seizure of terrain. At the time, given the stark backdrop of withdrawal and Vietnamization, those results were probably as much as could be expected.

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<sup>42</sup>Logistics Lessons Learned, II Field Force After Action Reviews, Combined Arms Research Library, Ft. Leavenworth, KS.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Both world wars were won by the overpowering superiority of Allied firepower, numbers and technology. The stalemate in Korea was “guaranteed” by the same kind of superiority. During the Vietnam War, the strategy of attrition reached its zenith as the American way of war.<sup>1</sup>

Colonel John M. Antal

One should always be wary about making facile connections and “lessons learned” from past military operations. Even the relatively recent Cambodian incursions occurred under circumstances so unique that any attempt to pull specific predictive analysis from them is doomed to be ambiguous and fraught with shortcomings. Only in more general terms do the successes and failures of Operation Rockcrusher begin to have meaning to the present and future.

Examining Rockcrusher does provide a means to perceiving our turbulent experiences in Vietnam. The results of the operation support what is becoming an increasingly common understanding of the nature of the war; that it pitted two foreign armies, the NVA and US Army, against each other in South Vietnam. As Harry Summers asserts, the NVA maintained an offensive strategy, the US did not and the outcome of the war reflected this dichotomy.

Through the base area system, the NVA strategy was backed by a wealth of logistics and infrastructure. The vast amount of material captured during the Cambodian

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<sup>1</sup>John E. Antal, “Thoughts About Maneuver Warfare,” in *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology*, Richard D. Hooker Jr., ed. (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993), 60.

operations portrays the depth of the North Vietnamese commitment to victory.

Rockcrusher's delaying effect on the NVA invasion timetables was demonstrated in the short-term stability in South Vietnam after the operations. The decision by COSVN to avoid the tactical battle and accept this delay testifies to North Vietnam's ability to maintain their strategic focus. It is also clear that the US strategic goals of the incursions, limiting NVA disruption of the US withdrawal and Vietnamization programs fit into the strategically defensive framework that destined US endeavors in Vietnam to failure. Again, at this stage of the conflict, when defeat was essentially accepted by the Nixon administration, the nature of operations in Cambodia was appropriate to accomplish its strategic objectives.

Operation Rockcrusher also provides a clear illustration of the requirement for commanders and staff who are skilled in operational art. The need to thoroughly integrate the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war is one of the key transferable lessons of this campaign. While it is true that operational planners shoulder the burden for creating operations and developing tactics that support strategy, the role of political and strategic military leaders in crafting achievable aims is vital. Contradictory and vague political guidance creates huge dilemmas for those responsible for the lower levels of conflict.

In the case of the incursions, the National Command Authority directed an operation of relatively limited duration and scope. Yet, President Nixon's fixation on COSVN and his desire for a crushing defeat of NVA forces was unfeasible given the imposed restrictions, creating just such a dilemma for the planners of Rockcrusher. This

contradictory situation led essentially to the failure of two operational objectives of the campaign, seizure of COSVN and destruction of main NVA forces. Fortunately, destruction of Communist infrastructure, the operational objective which supported the strategic aims of withdrawal and Vietnamization, was feasible in terms of the capabilities and limitations of US forces. Thus, this aspect of the incursions succeeded and helped set the conditions for a relatively bloodless withdrawal of US forces from Southeast Asia over the next three years.

Rockcrusher also confirms that, even in difficult political circumstances, the US military usually completes its missions effectively at the tactical level. The incursions achieved tactical objectives despite the difficulty in sustaining an offensive focus in a war that was winding down. Under a very compressed time schedule, division-sized units essentially reversed gears and conducted a complex combined offensive operation. Still, as evidenced in problems of command and control and logistics, friction developed. These issues highlight the requirement for flexibility and versatility in large tactical units.

Today's force continues to recognize this need, particularly in an era of rapid change, small force structure, and uncertain missions. Seeking tactical synergy like that created by Task Force Shoemaker, planners now conceive a "Strike Force," a highly deployable brigade, or regimental-sized armored unit as part of the permanent force structure. This force is designed to be capable of conducting decisive tactical operations in low-to-mid-intensity environments, usually in conjunction with light forces. While much of the strike force composition, doctrine, and employment is evolving, the capability is reminiscent of the use of cavalry and armor in Cambodia. The ability to



employ heavy forces with robust command and control in lower intensity scenarios that typically involve light forces creates operational flexibility. This, in turn, better supports execution of strategic aims.

Unfortunately, strike forces and flexible operations do not solve one of the consistent weaknesses facing US ground forces. In Cambodia, this shortcoming took the form of a failed air campaign at the operational level and an inability to decisively defeat enemy forces at the tactical level. This “unlearned lesson” is the US’s inability to recognize the pitfalls of attritional warfare. The current blast of information age technology has made this tendency nearly irresistible. A temptation to over rely on the technological tools at our disposal has reinforced a general unwillingness to apply maneuver in favor of stand-off, attritional methods of engagement. Like the use of Arclight strikes in Cambodia, this is nothing new.

Riding the crest of digitization as a means of near perfect situational awareness, certain army intellectual circles again envision the silver bullet. Quick, decisive engagements with very few friendly casualties seem within grasp. The uncertainties and intelligence voids confronting the forces of Operation Rockcrusher are viewed as relics of the US’s preinformation age past. Yet, there is concern about the validity of this vision. The “darker side,” taken to its logical conclusion, begs for a centralized, top-driven decision-making process. Some hearken back to the “C2 bird” mentality seen during the incursions. After all, “in the information age, higher headquarters will always

know best.”<sup>2</sup> Several of the same indicators seen in the Incursions are reappearing: a fixation with airpower as a means of decision, an intolerance for operations that risk casualties, and a perceived micromanagement of small units by higher headquarters.

Ominous indicators from Army combat training centers recognize a trend is at least partly attributable to an over reliance on attritional methods of engagement:

Commanders and staffs, for the most part, are not adequately trained to set conditions for synchronization of the combined arms team, much less preserve it during battle. Furthermore, battalion and brigade commanders display a declining level of tactical competence, battlefield intuition, and mastery of the science and art of warfighting.<sup>3</sup>

These failings create a circular logic that seems to push continually toward the technological “ace in the hole.” If tactical commanders and staffs are not well trained, operational planners cannot risk applying them to the dangers of maneuver warfare. This pushes the US force toward attritional operations and tactics which, in turn, continues the atrophy of maneuver skills. The cycle continues, increasing the reliance on technology to fill the gap. While the US maintains technological overmatch, the effects of this spiral are minimized. This is, at best, a temporary condition.

What does attrition imply for the operational Army? As exemplified in the incursions, attrition warfare emphasizes firepower and an orientation on controlling terrain. Attrition emanates from a desire to force (“push”) the enemy, grinding down his

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<sup>2</sup>Joseph S. McLamb, “The Future of Mission Orders,” *Military Review*, September-October 1997, 72.

<sup>3</sup>Statement by Colonel John D. Rosenberger, Commander, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (Opposing Forces) National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, before the Military Readiness Subcommittee, Committee on National Security United States House of Representatives, First Session, 106th Congress, 26 February 1999, downloaded from email, 23 March 1999.

strength with even greater strength. Maneuver avoids strength, attacking his weak spots, “trapping” the enemy, and causing his strength to collapse. At the tactical level, maneuver translates to execution of varying degrees of fire and movement in order to decisively destroy him.<sup>4</sup> Given the political time and space limitations governing Rockcrusher, the strategic situation effectively dictated attritional tactics. We could not effectively maneuver on the enemy force and had to content ourselves with seizing terrain through direct, firepower-based assaults.

Modern attrition warfare has changed from the images of Vietnam, however. Through advanced delivery means, extended weapons ranges and highly accurate targeting, attacks on the enemy strength, his “center of gravity,” look deceptively feasible. The enemy is put, not in the maneuverist’s position of disadvantage, but, rather a circumstance of disadvantage through focused firepower. Does this not provide the end state denied to the planners of Rockcrusher without the risks associated with employing ground forces in close contact with the enemy?

Yet, as seen in the shift from the Menu bombings to Operation Rockcrusher, the requirement for maneuver, to place *forces* where they threaten enemy destruction, will probably not diminish. David Grossman describes how attritional operations are effective only when combined with the threat of physical attack.<sup>5</sup> Using historical examples from

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<sup>4</sup>Antal, 61.

<sup>5</sup>David A. Grossman, “Defeating the Enemy’s Will: The Psychological Foundations fo Maneuver Warfare,” in *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology*. Richard D. hooker Jr., ed. (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993), 147-148.

Hanoi to the Iraqi desert, he describes how the effect of forces to the rear of the enemy was the deciding factor in causing psychological and tactical collapse. When freedom of maneuver is curtailed, as in the case of Rockcrusher's twenty-five mile limit of advance, this capability diminishes. Like the Arclight strikes that rained throughout Cambodia after the incursions, attritional force is substituted to "degrade" the enemy. The North Vietnamese waited out the bombings and were eventually victorious.

Herein lies the conflict. In an attempt to retain the US traditional mastery in attritional warfare, we maintain a secondary role for maneuver forces. Both elements should work together to achieve victory. Yet, by leaning too heavily toward precision engagement as a means of "safe" attritional warfare, the Army insures that the attritional aspect of Vietnam operations will remain central in its doctrine and practice. Maneuver warfare skills; initiative over adherence, orchestration over synchronization, and flexibility over precision become buzzwords. This kind of false maneuverism could lead to much bloodshed if, unlike the NVA forces in the Fishhook, a serious opponent stays and fights at close quarters. As one observes the current air campaign in Kosovo here in the spring of 1999, it is fair to ask if, yet again, the US has lost its freedom to maneuver.

## APPENDIX A:

### CHRONOLOGY OF MAJOR EVENTS

June 1954: The Geneva Peace Accords recognize Cambodia with “full independence and sovereignty.” Prince Sihanouk embarks on a policy of neutrality.<sup>1</sup>

1960-1963: Cambodia faces increased border clashes with South Vietnam and Thailand. Relations sour between the US and Cambodia.

1963: Sihanouk terminates formal relations with the US and South Vietnam

1964-65: South Vietnam verges on collapse, introduction of conventional US ground forces to the war. Sihanouk permits VC to expand border sanctuaries in Cambodia.

1966-67: Cambodia opens formal diplomatic relations with Hanoi. Port of Sihanoukville opens to arms and supply shipments destined for Communist forces in South Vietnam. General Westmoreland denied permission to attack border sanctuaries as situation stabilizes in South Vietnam. Salem House patrols begin into Cambodia. Roughly 1300 patrols are conducted prior to the incursions.

January–June 1968: Tet Offensive and aftermath. Communists suffer severe losses but convince US public that the Vietnam War cannot be won. Lyndon Johnson refuses to run for reelection.

November 11, 1968: Richard M. Nixon elected President on a “Peace with Honor” platform promising a military withdrawal from Southeast Asia.

March 1969: Menu bombings secretly commence in Cambodia. 3,874 sorties follow between March 18, 1969, and May 26, 1970.

July 1, 1969: President Nixon formally initiates Vietnamization.

July 1969: COSVN Resolution Number 9 articulates NVA post-Tet strategy of disruption of the US withdrawal and Vietnamization plan.

March 1970: Cambodian Prime Minister Lon Nol launches an anti-Vietnamese campaign and seizes power on March 18.

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<sup>1</sup>Information extracted from the text and text-cited sources.

April-May 1970: Planning and execution of Rockcrusher and related attacks. NVA conducts "Campaign X" offensives against the Lon Nol regime. Elements of four NVA/VC divisions expand base areas, seize much of northeastern Cambodia, and threaten Phnom Penh. Atrocities against ethnic Vietnamese by Lon Nol's forces occur in Cambodia.

April 14: ARVN units from III CTZ conduct three-day raid (Toan Thang 41) against sanctuaries in Angel's Wing sector of Cambodia.

April 19: General Abrams informs field force commanders to prepare contingencies for cross border attacks into Cambodia. Planning begins for operations Toan Thang 42 through 46.

April 29: Toan Thang 42 launched under ARVN control against sanctuaries in Parrot's Beak section of border. Phase I (preparation) initiated as 1st Cavalry Division reports Task Force Shoemaker prepared for initial operation into the Fishhook border region. Units move into final staging areas.

April 30: The administration delays execution of Toan Thang 43 (Fishhook) to coincide with Presidential address to the nation. Units conduct final combat preparations. Elements from the 25th ID (2-47 Mech, 2-34 Armor, 3-4 Cav) come under operational control of Task Force Shoemaker.

May 1: Early morning ARCLIGHT and artillery strikes precede ground advance concluding Phase I. Phase II (assault) commences at 0730 as TF Shoemaker crosses line of departure. First ground units cross into Cambodia at 0945. By nightfall, 3d ARVN Airborne Brigade establishes LZ East and Center in Cambodia. US troops secure LZ X-Ray. LZ's converted to firebases by the following morning. First significant cache discovered by 3d ARVN. Enemy contact is light throughout zone of attack. 1-9 Air Cav destroys several NVA elements attempting to evacuate area.

May 2: Phase III, exploitation of initial allied assault begins. 6 additional ARCLIGHT strikes impact in Fishhook. 11th ACR links up with 9th Battalion of 3d ARVN Airborne Bde. 11th ACR reaches Highway 7 by the afternoon. Allies discover numerous small- and medium-sized caches. 1-9th Air Cav discovers "the City." NVA avoid contact.

May 3: 1-5 Cav investigate "the City" discovering the third largest cache of the operation. 1-9th Air Cav continues to screen along the 25-mile limit of advance, destroying additional four enemy convoys. NVA and VC begin limited attempts to disrupt allied attacks. 11th ACR(-) reaches Highway 7. II FF alerts 25th ID to prepare to attack into base area 354.

May 4: II FF realigns boundaries giving 25th ID the western third of the Fishhook. TF Shoemaker expands to include elements of 1st Bde, 1st Cav and 1/11 ACR. 11th ACR receives orders to seize Snoul and begins attack along Route 7. Destroyed bridges slow advance of 11th ACR. Evacuation and destruction of captured supplies begin at "the City" by 1-5th Cav.

May 5: Task Force Shoemaker stood down. All forces revert to 1st Cav control to continue operations. 5-12th Inf Bn, 199th Light Infantry Bde becomes OPCON to 2d Bde, 1st Cav. 2/11 ACR seizes Snoul after defeating the 141st NVA regiment in heavy fighting. Units continue search and destroy operations in areas of operations. Several additional caches are discovered. In II CTZ, the 4th ID attempts to launch Operation Tame the West until turned back by heavy fires at the projected LZ's.

May 6: Phase IV (Expansion of search, destroy and evacuation operations) begins. II FF and ARVN III Corps order three additional attacks into base areas. The 25th ID conducts operation Bold Lancer (Toan Thang 44) to locate caches in Base Area 353. 2d Bde, 1st Cav initiates Toan Thang 45 against Base Area 351. 9th ARVN Infantry Regiment conducts Toan Thang 46 against Base Area 350. To the south, ARVN forces seize Chup rubber plantation in Parrot's beak operations (Toan Thang 42). In II CTZ, 4th ID reinitiates Tame the West after additional preparatory fires and seizes initial objectives.

May 8: D Co, 2-12 Cav discover "Rock Island East," the largest cache of the war, during Toan Thang 45 assault. ARVN units in Toan Thang 46 meet coordinated NVA resistance. COSVN begins evacuating from Base Area 353. US intelligence confirms location of COSVN.

May 9: The 25th ID expands Bold Lancer in an effort to seize COSVN. ARCLIGHT strikes alert COSVN personnel of impending assault. Most COSVN personnel move out to the west hours prior to US arrival. Assessment and evacuation begins of "Rock Island East." Operation Cuu Long initiated by ARVN to destroy Mekong Delta base areas. In conjunction, South Vietnamese/US Navy flotilla evacuate ethnic Vietnamese from Cambodia.

May 13-14: II FF realigns the tactical area of responsibility. 2-34 Armor and 2-47 Mech revert back to 25th ID. 1st Cav extends boundaries east, 25th ID controls western half of Fishhook. 9th ARVN Regiment assumes control of south of Fishhook. 5-12th Inf Bn OPCON to 2d Bde/1st Cav from 199th Light Inf Bde, assumes security of FSB Brown. FSB Brown assaulted by 174th NVA regiment. US forces repel the assault with heavy NVA losses.

May 16: D Company, 1-12 Cav repels an enemy assault on FSB Ranch. 4th ID concludes Operation Tame the West in II CTZ.

May 19-20: II Field Force AO realignments remove 1st Cav from Fishhook to fully support Toan Thang 45.

May 21: ARVN troops in Toan Thang 46 discover a major hospital complex after heavy contact.

May 23: 5-7 Cav Bn discovers "Shakey's Hill," the second largest cache of the operation.

June 5-20: Numerous small to medium sized caches discovered in all AOs. Engineers complete road networks to support cache evacuations of Shakey's Hill and other caches. Enemy contacts and mining incidents increase throughout Fishhook. Monsoon rains begin to severely restrict mobility of heavy forces

June 15: 28 NVA killed in an assault of FSB David in 1st Cav AO.

June 20: Phase V (withdrawal) commences for Toan Thang 43 and 46. US forces conduct sequenced withdrawal supported by covering artillery and air support.

June 21-28: US forces continue evacuation and redeployment to South Vietnam. 1st Cav units continue to discover small and medium sized caches. Most are destroyed in place. Rome Plow and demolition operations destroy NVA bunkers and cache sites. Firebases are relocated to ensure continuous support of the mission. Allied forces report little contact throughout sector.

4:00 p.m., June 29: Elements of 3/11 ACR reenter South Vietnam as the last ground forces out of Cambodia.

5:28 p.m., June 29: 1-9 Air Cav withdrawals last heliborne forces out of Cambodia.

6:00 p.m., June 29: II FF deadline for all US troops out of Cambodia

June 30, 1970: US ends ground and advisory support of Toan Thang 42 and 46, Operations Tame the West and Cuu Long. ARVN units continue operations on reduced scale.

July 1970: NVA and VC forces begin rebuilding the Cambodian sanctuaries. Attacks against Lon Nol and ARVN forces in Cambodia increase. Ho Chi Minh network expands.



## APPENDIX B

### CAMBODIAN INCURSION TASK ORGANIZATIONS, 14 APRIL TO 30 JUNE 1970<sup>2</sup> (Major maneuver units only, significant daily task organization changes mentioned in text)

#### TOAN THANG 41 (14-17 April 1970): ARVN III Corps

ARVN Task Force 225  
ARVN Task Force 318

comprising a total of three infantry battalions, two ranger battalions, two  
armored cav squadrons, and supporting troops

#### ROCKCRUSHER OPERATIONS

##### II Field Force Control

12th Aviation Group (General and Direct Support to all Rockcrusher operations)

##### 1st Cav Div Control

1-9th Air Cav Sqdrn (remained under Division control supporting all 1st Cav  
operations)

11th Aviation Group (General and Direct Support to all 1st Cav operations)

#### TOAN THANG 42 (29 April-30 June 1970): ARVN III/IV Corps

ARVN Task Force 225  
ARVN Task Force 318  
ARVN Task Force 333

comprising a total of one infantry regiment, four ranger battalions, four armored  
cav squadrons, and supporting troops

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<sup>2</sup>Information extracted from 1st Cavalry Division and 25th Infantry Division After Action Reports, Combined Arms Research Library, Fort Leavenworth, KS and Tran Dinh Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion* (Washington, DC: US Army Center for Military History, 1979), Chapter 4.

ARVN IV Corps Troops

9th ARVN Inf Div, five armored cav squadrons, four ranger battalions

Attached for operations 7-13 May 1970

3d Bde, 9th Inf Div (US) (-) (attached to 25th Inf Div)  
6-31 Inf Bn

TOAN THANG 43 (1 May 1970): 1st Cav Div/25th Inf Div

Task Force Shoemaker

3d Bde/1st Cav Div  
A/1-5 Cav Bn  
2-5 Cav Bn  
1-7 Cav Bn  
5-60 Inf Bn (attached from 3d Bde/9th Inf Div) (2-6 May)  
2-47 Mech Bn (attached from 3d Bde/9th Inf Div)  
2-34 Ar Bn (attached from 25th Inf Div)  
3-4 Cav Sqdrn (-) (OPCON from 25th ID until 6 May)

11th ACR  
1/11 ACR (-)  
2/11 ACR  
3/11 ACR

3d ARVN Abn Bde  
1st ARVN Cav Regt (DS)  
3d ARVN Abn Bn  
5th ARVN Abn Bn  
9th ARVN Abn Bn

Reorganization for Combat - 1st Cav AO, 6 May 1970:

1st Bde/1st Cav Div  
2-5 Cav Bn (-)  
TF 2-7 Cav  
TF 2-34 Ar  
TF 2-47 Mech (-)  
1st ARVN Cav Regt (DS)

3d Bde/1st Cav Bn  
1-5 Cav Bn  
1-12 Cav Bn

11th ACR  
1/11 ACR  
2/11 ACR  
3/11 ACR

3d ARVN Abn Bde  
1st ARVN Cav Regt (DS)  
3d ARVN Abn Bn  
5th ARVN Abn Bn  
9th ARVN Abn Bn

Reorganization for Combat--1st Cav AO, 16 May 1970:

1st Bde/1st Cav  
1-5 Cav Bn (-)  
1-12 Cav Bn  
A, C/2-5 Cav Bn  
C,D,E/2-7 Cav Bn  
R331, V331 CIDG

11th ACR(-)  
2/11 ACR  
3/11 ACR(-)

Reorganization for Combat: 1st Cav AO, 20 May 1970.

11 ACR(-)  
2/11 ACR  
3/11 ACR(-)  
C/2-5 Cav Bn  
1-12 Cav Bn

Reorganization for Combat, 1st Cav AO, 1 June 1970:

11 ACR  
1/11 ACR  
2/11 ACR  
3/11 ACR(-)

Reorganization for Combat and Withdrawal-1st Cav AO, 20 - 29 June 1970:

2/11 ACR(-)

Reorganization for Combat-25th ID AO: 9 May 1970:

2nd Bde/25th ID

1-27 Inf Bn

4-9 Inf Bn

3-4 Cav Sqdrn (-)

Added 10 May

2-47 Mech Bn (detached 11 June)

2-22 Mech Bn (-)

2-27 Inf Bn (detached 13 May)

A/2-34 Ar Bn (attached remainder of 2-34 Ar Bn 12 June)

Reorganization for Combat-25th Inf Div AO: 15 May 1970:

1st Bde/25th Inf Div

2-14 Inf

2-60 Inf (attached 22 May)

3-22 Inf (detached 3 June)

1-5 Mech (detached 21 May)

2-47 Mech (attached 11-14 June)

1/11 ACR (detached to 1st Cav 21 May)

3-4 Cav (attached 30 May-14 June, detached to ARVN/11th ACR, 15-30 June)

D/3-4 Cav (attached 21 May)

2nd Bde/25th ID

1-27 Inf

4-9 Inf

2-22 Mech

2-34 Armor (-)

3-4 Cav (-) (detached 30 May)

11th ACR (-)

1/11 ACR

3/11 ACR

3-4 Cav (-) (OPCON 25 June)

Reorganization for Withdrawal – 25 th ID AO: 29 June 1970:

1st Bde/25th ID

- 2-14 Inf
- 2-22 Inf
- 2-60 Inf
- 4-9 Inf
- 2-34 Armor (-)

2d Bde/25 th ID

- 1-27 Inf

11th ACR (-)

- 1/11 ACR
- 3/11 ACR
- 3-4 Cav (-) (OPCON 25 June)

TOAN THANG 44 - OPERATION BOLD LANCER (6-14 May 1970): 25th ID

1st Bde/25th Inf Div

- 2-14 Inf Bn
- 3-22 Inf Bn
- 2-22 Mech Bn (detached to 2d Bde 10 May)
- 1-5 Mech Bn
- 3-4 Cav(-) Sqdrn (7-9 May for COSVN sweep operations)
- 3-17 Air Cav Sqdrn (-)

TOAN THANG 45 (6 May-29 June, 1970)

2d Bde/1st Cav Div

- 5-7 Cav Bn
- 1-8 Cav Bn (-)
- 2-12 Cav Bn
- 5-12 Inf Bn (attached from 199th Light Inf Bde effective 12 May)
- D/3-17 Cav Sqdrn

Reorganization for Combat, 16 May 1970:

2d Bde/1st Cav Div  
5-7 Cav Bn  
1-8 Cav Bn (-)  
2-12 Cav Bn  
1 Co, 343 CIDG  
851 ARVN Regional Force Co  
TF 5-12 Inf  
I/3-11 ACR  
D/3-17 Cav Sqdrn  
3-8 ARVN Bn (DS)

3d Bde/1st Cav Div  
1-5 Cav Bn (-)  
2-5 Cav Bn (-)  
1-7 Cav Bn

Reorganization for Combat, 20 May 1970.

1st Bde/1st Cav  
1-5 Cav

2d Bde/1st Cav  
5-7 Cav  
1-8 Cav(-)  
2-12 Cav  
TF 5-12 Inf  
I/3-11 ACR  
D/3-17 Cav  
3-8 ARVN Bn (DS)

3d Bde/1st Cav  
2-5 Cav(-)  
1-7 Cav  
2-7 Cav(-)  
D/2-8 Cav

Reorganization for Combat, 1 June 1970:

1st Bde/1st Cav

1-5 Cav

2-12 Cav

2d Bde/1st Cav

5-7 Cav

1-8 Cav

5-60 Inf

TF 5-12 Inf

I/3-11 ACR

D/3-17 Cav

3-8 ARVN Bn (DS)

3d Bde/1st Cav Div

1-7 Cav Bn

1-12 Cav Bn

2-5 Cav Bn

2-8 Cav Bn

Reorganization for Combat, 20 June 1970:

1st Bde/1st Cav Div

1-5 Cav Bn

2-12 Cav Bn

2d Bde/1st Cav Div

2-7 Cav Bn (-)

5-7 Cav Bn

5-60 Inf Bn

TF 5-12 Inf

D/3-17 Cav Sqdrn

1-8 ARVN Bn (DS)

3d Bde/1st Cav Div

1-7 Cav Bn

1-12 Cav Bn

2-5 Cav Bn (-)

2-8 Cav Bn

TOAN THANG 46 (6 May-20 June 1970): 9th Regiment, 5th ARVN Inf Div

9th ARVN Inf Regt  
1st ARVN Armored Cav Sqdrn

CAMBODIAN BORDER OPERATIONS OUTSIDE OF ARVN III CORPS

OPERATION TAME THE WEST (BIHN TAY I - IV) 5 May-27 June 1970: ARVN II CORPS, 4th INF DIV (US):

1st Bde/4th Inf Div  
3-8 Inf Bn  
1-14 Inf Bn  
3-506 Inf Bn  
1-12 Inf Bn (OPCON from 2d Bde)

2d Bde/4th Inf Div (-)  
1-22 Inf Bn  
2-35 Inf Bn

22d ARVN Inf Div  
ARVN Task Force 8  
ARVN Task Force 44  
ARVN Task Force 45

comprising a total of eight infantry battalions (or equivalents) and one armored cav squadron (-) and supporting troops

23d ARVN Inf Div  
ARVN Task Force 214  
ARVN Task Force 247  
ARVN Task Force 240  
ARVN Task Force 311

comprising a total of eight infantry battalions, two ranger battalions and two armored cav squadrons and supporting troops



OPERATION CUU LONG, 9 May- 0 June 1970: Mekong Delta-IV ARVN Corps, US  
Naval Task Force Cougar (supported ethnic Vietnamese evacuations in Cambodia)

9th ARVN Inf Div

21st ARVN Inf Div (-)

comprising a total of five infantry regiments, two ranger battalions, five  
armored cav squadrons and supporting troops

Amphibious Task Force 211

(1 ARVN Marine Bde, 70 Vietnamese Navy vessels and transports)

USN Task Force Cougar

(30 USN vessels)

## GLOSSARY

- ACAV.** Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicle, an M-113 Armored Personnel Carrier heavily armed with one .50 caliber and two M-60 machine guns protected by steel plates
- ACR.** Armored Cavalry Regiment; a heavy combined arms unit used often used as a reconnaissance or exploitation force for an Army corps. A regiment consists of roughly 5000 troops consisting of three ground squadrons composed of tanks, Sheridans and ACAV's and one air squadron of scout and Cobra attack helicopters
- AO.** Area of Operations; a geographic area, including its airspace, assigned to a unit to conduct military operations
- AK-47.** Standard infantry weapon of NVA regular troops. Russian-designed 7.62mm assault rifle known for rugged reliability. Copied by China and several Warsaw Pact countries.
- ARVN.** Army of the Republic of Vietnam. South Vietnam's ground forces
- AVLB.** Armored Vehicle Launched Bridge, an extendable bridge mounted on an M-48 tank chassis capable of spanning a 17 meter gap.
- B-52.** The Stratofortress, the primary US strategic bomber of the cold war, adapted for conventional bombing for use in Vietnam.
- Base Area.** US designation for an area used by the Communists as a base camp. Usually contained bunkers and fortifications, supply depots, hospitals and training facilities.
- Blue Team.** A platoon or company sized element of air assault infantry with transport helicopters dedicated to exploiting reconnaissance gained by "Pink Team" aerial assets.
- Cobra.** US AH-1 helicopter gunship carrying a crew of two and mounting a heavy array of machine guns, grenade launchers and/or rockets.
- Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ).** One of four military regions within South Vietnam used to separate the country for operational planning and execution. The regional system was developed by the South Vietnamese and adopted by US forces. ROCKCRUSHER occurred primarily in III CTZ, running from the northern Mekong Delta to the southern Central Highlands.

**Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN).** Communist party headquarters for South Vietnam. Subordinate to the Central Party Headquarters in Hanoi.

**Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG).** Local Vietnamese civilians trained and organized by US and ARVN special forces to provide local defense against VC/NVA.

**Daisy Cutter.** A 15,000 pound bomb usually dropped from a C-130 cargo aircraft. Used primarily to create a helicopter landing zones in thick jungle canopy.

**Field Force.** The sum of US forces operating in a particular Corps Tactical Zone in South Vietnam.

**Fire Support Base (FSB).** A semifixed artillery firing position established to increase indirect fire coverage over an area and provide security for the firing unit.,. Also termed "Fire Base," FSB's were often developed from a secured landing zone and used as a forward operating base for maneuver forces.

**Gunship.** Any helicopter mounting air to ground weaponry used in an offensive role. Primarily the AH-1G Cobra by the time of the Cambodian incursions.

**Khmer Krom.** Ethnic Cambodians trained by Sihanouk's army to destabilize South Vietnam, created in response to formation of the Khmer Serei and South Vietnamese border violations.

**Khmer Rouge.** Literally "Red Cambodians," Cambodia's infamous native communist party formed along Maoist concepts of peasant revolution.

**Khmer Serei.** US and ARVN trained, anti-Sihanouk Cambodian rebels.

**Laager.** A fortified night defensive position for armor and cavalry units.

**MACV.** Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. US supreme headquarters over all US military activities in South Vietnam, originating in 1962 from the Military Assistance Advisory Group.

**Menu.** Code name for the secret B-52 bombing campaign against Communist base areas in Cambodia.

**NVA.** The North Vietnamese regular army, a well-equipped, disciplined light infantry force.

**Patton.** A US M-48 medium tank mounting a 90 millimeter main gun. Equipped armor battalions and the tank company of cavalry squadrons. The heaviest allied armored vehicle in Southeast Asia.

**Pink Team.** An aerial reconnaissance and security team composed of an observation helicopter and a gunship. Used effectively to locate enemy cache sites.

**Rockcrusher.** US code name for the overall cross border incursions into Cambodia.

**Rome Plow.** A partially armored bulldozer fitted with a special blade capable of cutting brush and small trees. Used for road and area clearance through jungle terrain.

**RPG.** Russian-built rocket propelled grenade launcher, the primary anti armor system of NVA infantry units. The RPG-3 and the heavier RPG-7 could disable or destroy most US armored vehicles and were also effective in an anti-personnel role.

**Salem House.** Code name for ground and air-inserted reconnaissance patrols into Cambodia conducted by MACV Studies and Observation Group, 1965-1970.

**Sapper.** Originally, in European wars, a soldier who built and repaired fortifications. VC sappers were commando engineers adept at penetrating allied defenses typically to plant explosives.

**Sheridan.** An M551 armored reconnaissance vehicle serving in armored cavalry troops. This air transportable aluminum hulled armored fighting vehicle mounted a 152mm missile/gun system often used to fire anti-personnel flechette rounds against infantry.

**Shoemaker.** Code name for the combined task force conducting Toan Thang 43.

**Spooky** – US Air Force C-47 transport converted to an aerial firing platform. Typically mounted three 7.62 minigun machine guns and could deliver devastating fires on a target area.

**Tet.** Lunar New Year in the Chinese calendar, the most important Vietnamese holiday. Used as cover to launch the Communist Tet Offensive of 1968.

**Toan Thang 41 to 45.** “Total Victory” in Vietnamese. Code name given to Cambodian incursions conducted from the III Corps Tactical Zone.

**Viet Cong (VC).** A contraction of Vietnam Cong San (Vietnamese Communist), South Vietnamese guerrillas operating in concert with and subordinate to NVA forces in South Vietnam.

**Vietnamization.** The Nixon administration's program to transfer responsibility for fighting to the South Vietnamese armed forces as US troops withdrew from the region.

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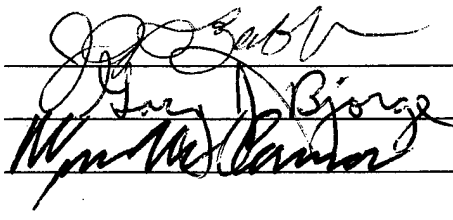
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